

## MEN OF MYSTERY

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# MEN OF MYSTERY

*by*

WILDER ANTHONY

Author of "Star of the Hills" etc.



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## CHAPTER I

THE man with the squint, called "Cock-Eye" by his acquaintances, stole a furtive glance at the cards he held on the table beneath his hand, looked quickly but without expression at his opponent, and pushed ten blue chips, worth twenty dollars each, into the middle of the table. With the chips and cash already accumulated there this "raise" made a pot of nearly a thousand dollars—high stakes, indeed—and the eyes of the dozen or so onlookers who had gathered around the players narrowed and glistened expectantly as they shifted to the other participant in the game.

Unlike Cock-Eye, this man did not have the appearance of an habitual gambler. He was young, well under thirty, and his boyish face was flushed with something more potent than just interest or eagerness in the game he played. By some his condition might have been attributed to liquor, for his eyes were unnaturally bright and his appearance dishevelled; but the boy was not drunk. He seemed feverish rather, sick perhaps, excited; but cool too, so cool that his burning gaze did not miss

a single movement of the man before him ; his set lips told of inner fires no less deep because so stoically repressed.

This repression, strange to say, to at least one among the spectators, did not seem to be engendered by the game at all. It seemed to go deeper, far deeper, than that. It was as if the boy's mind were fixed upon something remote from the cards and his hardfaced *vis-à-vis* : even while his eyes probed the other man's crafty mask and the fingers of his right hand toyed nervously with the heaps of chips and coins in front of him, it was plain that his thoughts were elsewhere. All at once he seemed to come to himself : he pushed his entire stake into the pot.

"I'll see you and go you a thousand better, Cock Eye," he said evenly ; and the bystanders exchanged startled glances at the magnitude of his "raise." You It had been a long time since Moondance had known a game like this.

"Call." The gambler's voice was as expressionless as his face as he pushed forward an equal amount. "What you got ?" he demanded curtly.

"Three kings." The boy threw his cards far upward down upon the table. "And you ?"

A ghost of a smile twitched for an instant at the corners of the gambler's hard mouth.

"Three queens," he answered, spreading them out

and"—he hesitated slightly as if to add effect to all his words—"a pair of treys. It's a full house, Lindsay. I win, I reckon." He leaned forward and began to rake the pot across the table toward him with his slim, long-fingered hands.

"Wait!" Lindsay's voice was still low and even and he did not move, but something in his manner caused a sudden hush to fall upon the men who had begun to murmur among themselves at the size of Cock-Eye's winnings. Without exception every eye in the room was turned toward the speaker; the winner froze motionless in the very act of collecting his hoard, his lips half parted in a soundless murmur of inquiry.

"You win, Cock-Eye," the boy went on, boring the other man with his feverish gaze—a gaze which seemed oddly at variance with his quiet tone. "You win; but you win crooked. You dirty cheat! You've 'stacked' your deals all evening."

"You're a liar! You . . ." The retort came quick and hot from the gambler's lips, and his right hand darted from the pile of his winnings towards his left armpit, where, like most of his kind, he carried a ready weapon. But he never drew it.

Quick as he was—and as a member of a fraternity those fellows measured quickness as the difference between life and death Cock-Eye Bill Lacy was hunted quicker than most—a big man who had

been standing near by absorbed in the game with quicker still. The gambler's fingers had barely closed upon his gun when the big man's grip clamped on his wrist and halted the uncompleted draw. It

"Cut it, Cock-Eye!" he growled, whirling the raging tinhorn around and up out of his chair so that they two stood face to face. "There'll be no shootin'. Lindsay's right; I've been watchin' you myself. You skunk! If the boy had a gun on his hip I'd not butt in; but there'll be no number in this place. You'll return what you've cheated from him. Savvy?"

"Much obliged, Regan." Lindsay, also on his feet by this time, addressed the big man. "I'm unarmed, but I can handle this alone. I think so. Maybe I wanted . . . But never mind. Tell him loose, please. Gun or no gun, he'll eat the 'liar' or take the consequences. The money doesn't matter at all—now."

Regan stared for an instant. Then he jerked the gambler's gun away from him and relinquished his grip.

"Go to it!" he said briefly.

Cock-Eye went to it. Against Tom Regan, who held him as helpless as an ordinary man might hold a half-grown boy, he realised the futility of turning his wrath, but Lindsay was different. Here, where they were nearer of a size, and even without his

the tinhorn possessed the courage of a cornered rat. He struck at the younger man savagely.

The spectators surged backward instantly, tickled at this prospect of a fight, now that Regan's interference had made a more serious and uneven encounter impossible. Those who expected to witness a lengthy battle, however, were disappointed.

Without for a single instant losing that odd feverish glitter from his eyes, almost without changing his stride, Lindsay stepped forward to meet his enemy's rush. There was a moment's confusion, a blocked blow or two, then the boy struck out swift and true at the gambler's snarling lips. There was a dull smack, a stifled grunt, and Cock-Eye crashed backward to the floor.

Lindsay watched him for a moment, saw that he was completely knocked out, and turned to Regan.

"I'm satisfied," he said. "Guess I can leave the rest to you, Tom. You can cash the pot and give my share to charity, if you like. It's all one to me. The money's spent. I don't want it. I wasn't trying to win exactly. I was playing for something I haven't been able to find—yet."

here, Bob ; not ever. As for *him*," he shot a winking glance at Cock-Eye, who, still dazed, was helped into a chair by some of the bystanders. " he's through for keeps. But half that pot is money, boy. You oughter take it."

" Aw, Bob don't need it ! " A man somewhere in the crowd exclaimed loudly. " His daddy's He . . . "

The speaker froze into sudden silence beneath a look which Lindsay flashed in his direction. Just a second the boy seemed to be on the point of resenting the remark. Then all at once he broke out to laugh.

" His daddy's rich," he mimicked. " Of course —my father. Good God, yes ! You're right, course, Duncan. My father is rich."

He laughed again, wildly, shrilly, but without the least trace of mirth. They all watched him curiously as he turned and flung out of the room, silent more, but bright-eyed still as a man in the throes of a raging fever.

Regan followed him with a thoughtful, troubled gaze until he had passed from sight. Then he turned to the spectators and dropped an eyelid.

" Loco," he observed, " he's plumb loco. I never saw but one man act thataway before, an' him wasn't a man a-tall. She was a woman. She murdered that same day."

## CHAPTER II

OUTSIDE in the street, dark, with a maze of tiny stars overhead, like gold dust sprinkled upon a mat of soot, Bob Lindsay halted uncertainly in the deeper shadow of a doorway and blinked into the night. He sensed rather than saw that the street was deserted, that only a few lights showed. This meant that it was late, for Moondance did not retire early ; but even so there was no thought of sleep in the young man's mind. He was thinking, rather, of excitement, action, diversion of almost any sort : something to deaden or eclipse that crawling sensation as of maggots in his brain. His jumping nerves, held in restraint by an exertion of will almost abnormal, were crying for relief, forcing him on, on, always on ; but his mind was incapable of focusing upon any single destination or objective from amid the chaos which filled it.

Liquor ? Bah ! He was no drinker, and the whisky he had already consumed in his first efforts to drown his loathing of the thing that was himself had merely intensified his torture. He had tried poker, too, without result. In his desperation he

had pitted himself against the trickiest gambler that little town could boast, and at the end, unarmed he was, he had deliberately accused Cock-Eye cheating—the unpardonable crime—in the half hope that a bullet might put a merciful end to his suffering. But he had failed. Regan had interfered. At then, because he was young and the love of life and manliness was still strong within him, he had enjoyed a moment's respite in thrashing the sneak who had robbed and insulted him. But nowhere had he found relief from the thing that was driving him mad. Even death, it seemed, was denied him. He must keep on fighting.

Coming to a sudden decision, he left the doorway and faced away from the brightly lighted front of Regan's saloon toward the midnight darkness of a quieter and less settled portion of the town. Since men and the diversions of men had failed him in his need, he would give Nature a trial. Somewhere out there in the dark beyond the houses, in the hills and valleys which he had roamed and loved since childhood, was peace. Solitude might succeed where society had failed. If not. . . . Well, he hoped that he would find strength to struggle even then.

The ramshackle building, dignified by the title of livery and feed stable, where he had left his horse, was deserted and quiet now, but a lantern had been left burning for the accommodation of late arrivals.



and by the light from this Lindsay led out and saddled the rawboned gelding which he himself had raised and broken from colthood. Five minutes later he was in the saddle and making his way through the outskirts of the town.

When he left the lights behind him and headed toward the ragged mountains, which showed up even in the dark against the skyline a dozen miles or so away, the boy had no distinct idea as to his destination. He was just riding. It was instinct, nothing more, that caused horse and rider to turn toward home, although in view of subsequent events one might reasonably have called it fate.

At first, Lindsay rode fast, furiously fast. The madness in his blood found a certain outlet in the sense of speed, and his horse was both willing and fresh. Up hill and down, across level tablelands, they raced, meeting no one, seen by none save the winking stars and the faint moon which was just beginning to rise. But the thing with which the horseman raced could not be distanced, neither could the splendid animal beneath him run for ever, and realising this at last the boy slowed down into a walk. Only his mind continued its headlong flight.

He began to think now that his brain was cracking. His head felt numb, dazed, a good deal as if he had been heavily struck, and yet his thoughts were racing.

racing fast and faster every minute. Came a moment when his body and his mind seemed wide apart; he had that weird feeling of looking down upon himself from a great height which hashish eaters as said at times to experience, and the sensation frightened him. He felt that he must do something that he must somehow force his brain to behave itself.

It grew darker. His eyes were closing, he thought, though he had no desire to sleep. It was very strange. He tried to keep them open, but failed. So this odd sleepiness which was not sleepiness, for his thoughts continued to seethe and bubble chaotically, persisted, and at last he gave himself up to it as one must in the end give up to the compelling influence of an anæsthetic, or to death.

Then all at once he felt better. His head was clear again. No blackness, no numbness, no more maggots gnawing at his brain tissues. He felt refreshed, soothed, almost on the point of honest drowsiness, when he heard a voice calling to him from somewhere, or so he thought, but when he looked around he could see no one.

"Who are you?" he mumbled brokenly. "What . . ."

Suddenly he understood. That faintly calling voice was the voice of his own conscience. He

looked around for a little, but closed his eyes finally with a shudder. Even in that one brief glance a picture had limned itself upon his memory. He groaned and shuddered again.

He was looking down upon a moon-bathed strip of nearly level ground. Directly beneath his feet a little stream ran swift and cold, beyond a house loomed dark and shadowy, and still farther away was a grove of breeze-rippled trees.

"It's the ranch! Home!" Lindsay groaned. "I've come home, after all. Home? I have no home!" He laughed wildly, as he had laughed hours ago at Regan's.

Once more he experienced that terrible sensation of being apart from himself. He heard his own voice: hoarse, unnatural, speaking to a grotesque figure with a dark blur where its face should have been:

"What has happened? Why have I come here?"

And the *thing* answered him:

"To pay! To pay! To pay!"

At this Lindsay laughed again and tried to ride away from the hideous shape. He understood at last. He was mad, wholly mad. That headless figure was merely a distorted vision from out of the sanity which had engulfed him ever since . . . ever

He lifted both hands above his horse's head and stared at them through the darkness.

"To pay," he repeated, "to pay!"

"Get out! Go away! Leave me alone!"

Lindsay waved his arms and stirred uneasily.

He thought that he still spoke to that hideous shadow without a face with which for hours he had been struggling at the bottom of the Pit. His voice sounded faint and far away. He knew that it was useless, but he continued to struggle.

His eyes burned. He rubbed them open and was surprised when they told him that it was broad daylight. The hot sun was shining into his face. With an effort he moved his head to one side and closed his eyes again, grateful to have escaped from that headless phantom which had pursued him through his dreams.

But he could not sleep. Full consciousness returned to his fevered brain and with it came wakefulness, realisation. He sat up suddenly as if startled and now his eyes remained wide open, staring and dilating with a terror stranger than any he had experienced during all that hellish night.

He was surrounded by familiar objects, things that he had once loved and cherished as his own, but an unknown terror could have been so great. He was fully clothed on the big bed in his own room. The daylight which had aroused him streamed beneath

a partly lowered shade. From this sunlight and his knowledge of the room's location he knew that it must be very late—nearly mid-day. It was also very still.

So still, indeed, that the ticking of a little clock on the stand behind the partly open door sounded like the blows of a hammer. Lindsay even fancied that he could hear the beating of his own heart. He sat up and swayed dizzily. A sharp pain shot through his head and for a moment he felt weak and horribly nauseated. Both pain and nausea passed, however, and he was surprised when he put his hand to his head and found it sore and messy with half-dried blood. Then he saw that there was blood upon the pillow, too. He had been hurt—struck, it seemed. How? By whom? He shook his head.

His gaze travelled around the room, slowly, fearfully, dwelling upon each familiar object with an almost rapt intensity. He saw the many little things which had become endeared to him from years of association, but he saw them now for the first time with horror-widened eyes. They were no longer commonplace, these belongings of his, for no longer was the room which held them his. Less than twenty-four hours ago he had left this room and the roof that covered it never to return. But now. . . .

He froze suddenly. For nearly a minute he stopped breathing. His gaze was focused on a drop of blood not far from the bedside: a little beyond this first drop and nearer to the partly open door were a second and a third. Lindsay eyed them in fascination. Had he bled so badly? It seemed so. He felt of his injured head once more a little stupidly. He got up and crept out into the hall.

The house was of two stories, with a narrow upper hall flanked by four bedroom doors, of which the boy's was one. At the farther end, opposite the head of the short stairway, the closed door of his father's chamber seemed to mock him as he stood staring at it. The remaining rooms were wide open and vacant as usual.

For a moment Lindsay stood still, holding his breath and staring from the line of blood drops on the floor to the closed door and back again; then, noiseless as a shadow, on his tiptoes he began to move along the hall. The trail, he found, led not to the closed door as he had dreaded but down the stairs, and after a lingering glance at the mocking portal, he steadied himself against the banister and descended to the lower floor.

Here the house was divided into six rooms: the first of which, the general living room, stood almost directly at the foot of the stairway. It was a high

the room, comfortably furnished with a fireplace and great deep chairs, and one end of it contained a desk and a small safe. It was here that Jackson Lindsay kept account of his various business affairs, here that Bob had last seen and spoken with the man he had been taught to call "father," and it was to this room that he would have first turned now even if the trail of blood spots which he followed had not led him straight to the wide open door.

Pausing in the doorway, the young man shot one glance into the living room; then clutched at the wall to save himself from falling. The breath rushed in a long drawn rasp through his parted lips.

"God! he exclaimed. "Oh, my God!"

The living room, as a rule fairly neat and well-kept, was now in a state of great disorder. Not far from the door a chair lay on its side, some books and papers were scattered about near the centre table, the hanging lamp had smoked horribly, and the safe door yawned wide. So much did Lindsay observe in the same quick, horror-stricken glance which took in the sight he had half expected and yet hoped not to see.

This was a huddled figure in a great arm-chair almost directly across the room. The figure of an elderly man, bent, misshapen, his gray-white hair

worn longer than most, horribly smeared and discoloured upon one side. His face, or, more properly speaking, the place where his face had been, was nothing but a mass of pulp, not a single feature was distinguishable ; but Lindsay knew him, nevertheless. It was his father, and he was dead—murdered !



### CHAPTER III

THE door had barely closed behind Lindsay, when big Tom Regan gathered up the money on the card table and divided it into two equal amounts. On one of these he placed in an envelope and locked up in his safe, the other he thrust into the hand of the still half-groggy gambler.

"Now," he remarked quietly, as he took Cock Eye by the elbow and steered him toward the door, "you'll get out. You skunk! Get out an' stay out! If you ever show your face in here again, I'll handle you myself."

After which, still without the least trace of emotion, he flung Lacy headlong into the street and turned his back upon him. Figuratively speaking, he had washed his hands of the whole affair.

But the incident rankled, and later, after he had closed up for the night and walked to the little cottage on the outskirts of the town where he maintained himself, Big Tom got to thinking, and his thoughts disturbed him.

Despite the difference in their respective ages he and Bob Lindsay had been close friends for many

years. Unmarried and without any kin of his own Regan possessed the paternal instinct to a strong degree, and in Bob he had visioned the fulfilment of those hopes which Fate had denied him in the flesh. In fact, in a way, he had almost adopted the boy, who, never entirely congenial with his father—a taciturn man of morose disposition who thought of little except money and the grosser pleasures of life—had heartily returned his affection. It was to Big Tom more than to any other that Bob owed the education and knowledge of right living he had gained, and to Regan's credit be it said that had he been on hand earlier in the evening the game between his young friend and Cock Eye Bill might never have taken place at all. But he had been absent for a time, and when he had returned it was too late to prevent what had already been begun. As it was, his watchfulness had anticipated a tragedy.

Now, however, Regan wished that he had done more. He wished that he had followed his young friend when he left the saloon, for he knew that something which he could not definitely name had taken hold of the boy. Had he, perhaps, quarrelled beyond the usual limit with his dissipated father or . . .

Regan shook his grizzled head as he got into bed. "Reckon I'll ride out an' look things over in the morn'g," he said to himself. "Bob sure was loco in

"He sure was. I never saw him act so crazy-like. It may have been booze partly; he'd been drinkin' some, that's a cinch. But I dunno. The lad ain't never shown a taste for hard liquor that I know of. His dad must be mixed up in it some place, I reckon. The ornery old skunk. He'd oughter know better; he sure had. That boy's high-strung, like a nervous colt. It don't pay to devil that kind continuous. It sure don't."

He yawned and stretched himself luxuriously.

"It's a funny thing," he mused, "how Jack Lindsay ever come to have a son like Bob a-tall. Barrin' they're both blonds, there ain't no manner of resemblance between 'em, not a mite. Good blood'll show in a man as well as a horse; it shows in Bob. The boy's a thoroughbred. But like Jack now. . . . H'm. Skunk—pure polecat—that's what I'd call him. It's the mother strain, I reckon, accounts for the boy. I never saw her. 'm. Reckon I'd better start right early. I sure id."

Regan went to sleep then and slept sound until daylight, for he was not the type to lie awake at night, whatever the cause. Nevertheless, daylight found him still thinking, and after he had eaten a hearty breakfast and attended to a few personal matters, he mounted his horse and rode off toward the foothills. •

A night's sleep had somewhat tempered his uneasiness, however, and since he was just a trifle uncertain as to his reception at Half Moon Ranch for he knew that Jackson Lindsay did not like him being acutely jealous of his influence over Ben Regan did not hurry. It was in his mind to arrive at the ranch about noon, when, in accordance with the prevailing custom, he would be asked to stay to dinner. Then, during the meal, he judged that he would be able to size up the situation without seeming to do so, or asking any direct question. For like nearly all old time western men Big Tex never directly interfered with another's private affairs.

He had covered only about a third of the way to the ranch when he received his first surprise. He had just reached the top of a steep hill and paused to let his horse breathe a little and to himself survey the neighbouring country, when his eyes fell upon a moving figure some distance off.

At first, of course, he watched it casually enough for out there on the borders of the range moving horsemen were not infrequent; then all at once he realised that he knew the man. Also, from the way the fellow avoided the regular road and kept his horse to the less easily travelled bottom lands it was reasonably clear that he did not court observation. Still, of itself, this seeming furtiveness was

"not so strange, not when one considered the identity of the horseman and what had taken place between himself and Big Tom on the previous night.

The solitary rider was Cock-Eye Bill.

"H'm." Regan cogitated, when the gambler had passed from sight around the end of a sandstone outcrop. "It's sure curious, it sure is. What business can that skunk of a tinhorn have out this way so early? He's no stockman that I ever heard tell of, an' he's more likely to be sleepin' than ridin' the hills this time o' day. H'm. I don't just like it; I sure don't. He's a snake, is Lacy, an' he'll sure figure to pay Bob for showin' him up. 'd better warn the boy to be on his guard, I reckon."

Some hours later Big Tom rode into Half Moon Ranch. He was a little surprised to find no indication of human activity about the place. Though it was almost noon, the regulation dinner hour for both man and beast, both house and barn appeared deserted; no smoke rose from the kitchen chimney.

A dozen hogs in a pen near the road ran squealing angrily to the fence as the horseman passed, a flock of ravenous hens came fluttering across the yard to meet him, and from the corrals a resolute nickering of a colt arose in greeting. All these were signs as plain as print to the experienced eye, and Regan had not been at the ranch

a minute before he knew that the usual chores had not been attended to that morning. The circumstance was a little odd, of course, almost extraordinary perhaps; but not necessarily alarming. It was capable of various explanations.

For one thing, though accounted a wealthy man, Jackson Lindsay was known to be niggardly in respect to the running of his ranch. He seldom employed adequate help. He kept a chore boy only during the busiest season. Half of the year he did all such menial labour himself, or left it to Bob, and he and Bob lived mostly alone except for such men as were absolutely required to attend to the cattle on the range, and at this particular season of the year these men were invariably far from home. To be sure, there was an ancient Indian, called "Taps," who acted as cook and odd-jobs man during the intervals between his periodical appearances, but Taps was a most uncertain quantity at best, and Regan happened to be aware of the fact that just now he was away on one of his semi-annual visits to the Reservation. Still, it was odd that Lindsay himself had not fed the stock, or that he had not done so, if he had returned home during the night, as the visitor supposed.

Dismounting in front of the barn, Regan tied his horse in a shady spot, loosened the cinch strap a little, and walked across the dusty yard toward the

house, closely followed by the noisy hens, who looked to him to supply their belated breakfast. Directly in front of the house, where the ground had been stamped and cut up by the hoofs of many horses, Regan paused for a moment to contemplate some tracks in the dust. He possessed a knack of seeing much that was usually missed by others, and it looked to him now as if several shod horses—two or three, he thought—had been tied in this spot since the beginning of dewfall on the previous night. The tracks were fresh and distinct, as were some fly-covered heaps of droppings. For the time being, of course, Big Tom did not attribute any particular significance to these signs; it was merely his habit to observe closely; but later on he remembered.

He proceeded up the veranda steps, which needed painting, and across the veranda itself to the front door. Here he stopped and thoughtfully regarded the weatherbeaten panels for a second or two before he applied his knuckles to them. He was considering what excuses he would make for his visit should he find Bob absent and his father at home; although he was already morally certain that the house was empty.

When several knocks brought no other response than a series of dull echoes he looked around uncertainly, rubbed his chin with his thumb as he

always did when puzzled. Somehow, he could have told exactly why, he had begun to feel faintly uneasy. The house had an air of having been deserted for a long time ; it was most unusual. And yet, why not ? Lindsay certainly had every right to leave home if he wished to do so. He was his own master. A man of his loose habits could seldom be depended upon. He might be drunk and asleep ; but it was noon now, and with all his faults . . . Those unfed pigs and chickens ?

Coming to a quick decision, Regan grasped the knob and turned it. He found the door unlocked, as he expected, and stepped across the threshold into the cool and shadowy hall. Since he had been inside the house many times before, he knew the way about, and after a hasty glance in all directions which told him nothing, he turned into the living room.



## CHAPTER IV

FOR a blurred interval—he never knew how long—Bob Lindsay stood still just inside the doorway of the living room, and stared. At first, dazed by the sudden and awful shock of his discovery, his mind, already upset by the events of the previous night, did not function clearly; he saw only through a kind of haze, which produced a dim, yet definite, picture of horrid intensity. It was as if he looked upon the body of the dead man from a great distance, his brain was swimming in a fog, clouded; and yet, in a way, he was keenly alert. He lived years in those first few minutes.

At length, this cloudiness, if it may be called such, began to assume the shape and substance of stern reality. What had at first been a ghastly phantasmagoria became now a clean-cut horror, a distinct terror, which took him by the throat and choked. Stilled, he wanted to cry out, to turn and run away, to hide, to fly from the thing in the chair; but, like one in the grip of a nightmare, he was helpless. His tongue was locked within sealed lips, his limbs were powerless, as if welded together by invisible chains.

Gradually, however, this feeling of physical helplessness gave place to a dawning comprehension that what he saw was real. He was not asleep—dreaming! He was awake—wide awake! He found presently that he could move about and at the same time take in details which had at first escaped him. From the mutilated head and huddled figure of the corpse his eyes flickered swiftly over the entire room; half unconsciously he took detailed note of its disturbed condition: the overturned chairs, the open safe, a litter of bottles and glasses in one corner, the various details which were to impress and confuse others later on.

When he did this Bob's fear and horror increased tenfold. He *knew* now that what he saw was real. It was no mere figment of his imagination, no aftermath of last night's phantasms, this scene before his eyes. It was real—genuine. And he—he was the author of it all. For such was his condition then, that although he had no recollection of the deed itself, the boy accepted at its face value the evidence of his vision. He believed that he was murderer—that in a condition akin to sleep-walking he had come home and killed the man who lay there before him.

With a shudder and a gasping intake of his breath so loud in that silent house that his taut nerves impeded, he moved a little farther into the room.

and peered down at the dead man. Somewhere at the bottom of his being an insistent voice had already begun to shout: "Run—run"; self-preservation, first of all the instincts, was asserting itself; but he fought against it. After all, he was no coward, he would pay the penalty when the time came; just now he was too morbidly fascinated by the evidence of the thing itself to think clearly of what the future held in store. Still, that insistent voice kept on hammering; life warning him that time was all in all just then.

A sunbeam, entering through the upper panes of one of the windows, fell directly across the dead man's head and shoulders, brought out in horrid detail the shapeless pulp that had been a face, showed every line and crease at the sides of the shrunken neck and the bloodstains on the shoulders and chest. In vain did Bob try to drag his gaze away from this awful magnet, each time that by an almost superhuman effort he succeeded, it returned again.

Suddenly his expression of rapt horror gave place to a look of sharp fear. He had heard no distinct sound, but a shadow had fallen across his field of vision from behind. Slowly, fearfully, he turned round and looked. He almost collapsed when his gaze fell upon Tom Regan.

Regan was not the type of man who is eas

startled or shocked. In his younger days he had served several terms as sheriff, he had experienced life in nearly all its phases, he knew the value of self-control in an emergency, and he had seen too many dead men to be easily horrified. He did not therefore, show any of the outward signs of excitement or dismay which many would have registered under similar circumstances. In fact, he acted almost as if he had been prepared for his gruesome find. He was as calm as a May morning.

Without even nodding to Bob, who stood in the middle of the room as motionless as wax, the big man lounged against the door casing and surveyed the spectacle before him with a face as devoid of expression as granite. A casual observer of his actions, had there been one, might have decided that he lacked sensibility; his calm was so profound as to appear unnatural; but such a decision would have been as erroneous as it was unjust. In reality Regan was more upset and horrified now than ever before in his life. He was all a-quiver inwardly: tense: his expressionless face masked emotions which would have done credit to the most sympathetic; he saw much more than he gave any appearance of seeing.

Almost without a flicker his eyes passed over the living occupant of the room to fasten upon the dead one; and just as Bob had done he stared at the

corpse with almost hypnotic concentration. But where Bob had stared with frightened and half-uncomprehending gaze, Regan saw now with the perfect calmness and understanding of one who many times before had looked upon the evidence of murder.

His eyes did not miss a single detail of the dead man's appearance. His dress, his position in the big chair, the horrid wound with its resultant blood-stains, the absence of any weapon with which such a wound might have been made, all these details and more the big man took in at a glance. From the body his gaze travelled slowly and methodically over the room, absorbing each smallest item of its furnishings, each indication of struggle, with a speed and perspicacity that might have done credit to Sherlock Holmes himself. And just as Holmes might also have done, Regan almost at once began to reconstruct the crime which had had its culmination in Jackson Lindsay's death.

The upset condition of the room had puzzled him from the very first. It indicated, on its face, that a struggle had taken place between the dead man and his assailant; so much was plain. But why? How could Lindsay have put up a fight when the position of his body, the wound in his head, the blood on the back of the chair, all showed clearly in Regan's mind, at least,—that he had been struck

while in the chair and that he had not moved afterward? To Big Tom it began to look very much as if the living room had been purposely and deliberately disordered, and he had not occupied his position in the doorway for more than a few minutes before he decided that the evidence of a hand-to-hand tussle was false.

His eyes hardened thoughtfully and he raised a big thumb and forefinger to his chin as he shot a shrewdly calculating glance at Bob.

"Sure one hell of a mess, ain't it?" he observed.

Bob swallowed convulsively and nodded. He did not speak. He just stared. Regan returned his look steadily.

"No use gettin' excited, Bob," he went on, speaking almost as calmly as if speculating upon some threatened change in the weather. "It's getting rattled over things like this that gets a man into trouble sometimes."

"Trouble." Bob's repetition of the word was parrot-like. Upon his chaotic mental state Regan's unexpected appearance and strange, compelling scrutiny had made almost no impression. His brain felt numb. He opened and shut his hands spasmodically. "Trouble," he repeated again tonelessly. "I'm as deep in trouble already as I can get, Tom!"

"Mebbe." Regan's tone was non-committal.

His mind had already flashed back to his young friend's strange mental condition the previous evening, to the remark which he himself had made then, and he was wondering now if that remark could have been in any sense prophetic. Then suddenly a bright light shone into the murk of his doubts.

The evidence indicated that Lindsay had been killed in cold blood—struck down from behind, he thought. That was enough. He felt that it was not in nature for Bob to do a thing like that. Quick as the ripple of heat lightning in a summer sky his eyes flicked away from the boy and around the room again.

"Safe's open," he mused, "but not busted. Maybe it's been robbed, maybe not. Jack opened it himself, likely, before he was croaked. Part of the frame-up? Hard to say. It all took place some time in the night, of course. He's been dead hours. The lad's dazed about helpless by it all. H'm!"

He studied the contents of the room for a little longer. Then he looked up at Bob again. He seemed to be scrutinising the ugly bruise on the side of the younger man's head.

"How'd you get hurt?" he asked abruptly.

"I—I don't rightly know, 'Tom." By a violent effort Bob succeeded in partly shaking off the sense of numbness which had held him ever since h

discovery. "I woke up in my own bed upstairs," he explained further. "I don't know how I got there, or when I got this rap on the head. I came down here and found him that—that way." He waved one hand toward the dead man. "I killed him, I guess," he added simply.

"The devil you did," Regan's gaze fell to the floor and travelled from a point near the dead man's chair to his own feet and back again. Then he glanced behind him toward the stairs.

"Bloodstains," he was thinking. "A plain trail. Too damn plain, if you ask me. Those stains didn't come from Bob—a bruise don't bleed that free. Jack, now, he couldn't have made 'em either. Bob wasn't feelin' no ways friendly toward his old man last night, he sure wasn't. Still . . . Hell's bells! There's no use figurin' this away. Guilty or not, this boy's no murderer. Not him. I'll gamble on hisc to play square—always. If he killed a man hsc do it in hot blood an' in self-defence. There wabe no fight here, none whatever. I'll bet a two dollar dog on it. An' where's the weapon? It ain't heres

Ignoring his companion, Regan left the living room and ascended the stairway on the trail of blood spots which Bob had followed down from his own room an hour earlier. Reaching the bedroom, the man thoughtfully scrutinised the mussed bed with its blood-smeared pillow; finally he stooped up



picked up a crumpled felt hat from the floor near the head of the bed. The hat was considerably crushed, and one side of its broad brim was a little blood-stained. Regan put it down at last and began a careful search of the room.

A few minutes later he was contemplating a heavy wooden maul, such as is often used by ranchmen for driving sharpened fence posts into soft ground, which he had pulled from beneath a pile of cast-off clothing in the bottom of a closet. The metal-bound head of this maul was stained with blood that was still almost damp to the touch.

Regan's iron calmness almost deserted him when he made this appalling discovery. Still, he had been in a way prepared for it. He sat down on the foot of the bed and filled and lighted a corn-cob pipe, which he smoked in huge deep puffs. Under the soothing influence of the tobacco his thoughts settled and began to take coherent shape once more; before many minutes his brain was functioning as smoothly as ever, albeit his hitherto expressionless countenance now wore a slightly worried look.

He was still smoking and turning matters over and over in his mind, striving to find a way out of the tangle that lay ahead, when a slight sound and shadow falling across the floor caused him to look to see Bob standing in the doorway.

"Sit down, lad," he said quietly. "It's time you got that cranky brain of yours into work order. We got some fast thinkin' to do between here and there. You don't know anything about this here, I suppose?" He included the maul and the disorder room in a little motion of his hand.

Bob did not sit down; he remained standing in the doorway, staring almost stupidly at the maul where it lay at his friend's feet. For a minute more he was silent. Then:—

"No, Tom," he shook his head. "I've already told you about all I know. The room was like this when I awoke. That—that . . . that . . .?"

"It's the thing the job was done with, looks like yes." Regan dropped his pipe, which had gone out, into his coat pocket. "Yes, it sure is, Bob. I found it in the closet yonder, your closet. Understand? You'd better come clean, son. You can trust me."

"But I am telling you, Tom: I don't really know anything," the boy almost wept in his effort to be convincing. "I was crazy last night, I think. It must have been. It's my damn nerves. I . . . You know—ever since I was wounded over there in France my nerves have been tricky; I—I break out in a cold sweat at times. It was that way last night. I was worse. I—I saw things! God knows there was

some excuse. He—I—we quarrelled, Tom. Nothing so extraordinary about that, perhaps, but this time it was worse than most. I'd been away for about ten days, you know, on some business of my own. I came home yesterday and found him drunk; he—he had a woman here with him. That started it. I'd warned him before that I wouldn't stand for that—again. Not here in the house, at my rate. I told him I'd leave home for good. He said things that drove me wild. I thought—God help me! I thought I'd kill him then. But I didn't. I kept my hands off somehow. I left the ranch.

“In Moondance, later—I was already half-crazed, tell you—I got to drinking some, not much; then gambling. I wanted to forget, to die! Anything but remember that I was—I was what he'd said I was, and—and laughed! I deliberately icked that row with Lacy. I . . .

“But I must have been crazier, or drunker, than realised, Tom. I remember next to nothing now of what happened after I left your place. There was an awful dream, I think, or maybe it was real. I don't know. I seemed to be in hell; I talked with demons—headless demons. Then came darkness—a blank. I woke up in my own bed here about four or two ago with this cut on my head and the bed and room all bloody, and I found *him* when . . .

came down. I—I suppose I must have returned in the night and killed him, but I don't remember doing it."

"I know." I get you, Bob." Regan nodded slowly, and regarded the younger man with sympathy in his eyes. He could guess easily enough the sordid details at which Bob had merely hinted; he saw that the boy was on the brink of collapse and he forbore from asking needless questions. It was enough for him just now to know that his friend believed that he was a murderer. It was like Bob, this sticking to what he believed to be the truth regardless of consequences. He was high-strung, nervous, inclined to be morbid and erratic at times, brave in the face of sudden danger as his war record and other occasions attested, but sensitive and suffering now from the aftermath of shell-shock. He must be saved somehow, in spite of himself.

Rising to his feet, Regan laid a big hand on his young friend's shoulder and gently shook him. "Take a brace, lad," he urged, forcing a bluff heartiness which he did not altogether feel into his voice. "Hell's bells! Ain't I here to see that you get a square deal? You're no murderer. Let that sink good an' deep inside your skull. We'll talk about the rest of it later. There was a woman here last night—yesterday—you said. Who was she?" "The same one—the one he'd been so the

with for the past couple of months, Tom. That tall brunette from town: Kate Sturgis. But I can't believe that she had anything to do with this."

"Mebbe not. But Kate Sturgiss is no chicken, lad. She's a vixen sometimes when the booze gets her. But I'll look into her case later. Now you listen to me. You're goin' away from here."

"Going away—me?" Bob looked up quickly.

"Yes, you." Regan led him to a chair and made him sit down on it. "You're goin' across the range to visit with Dave Kent for a spell, while I figure out the inwardness of this here job. You're innocent, I know that. But with the evidence framed like it is, to say nothin' of your own dam'fool notions of tellin' the truth regardless, the folks in Moonance—not knowing you like I do—might think different. Your dad never had so many friends 'vin', if we leave out Bill Lacy an' a few more like him, but dead he's liable to discover a heap, an' some of 'em might turn nasty. I don't aim to see you lynched, lad. The Bar K ain't very far off, at it's across the line in Montana, an' you can lie quiet there until you get yourself organised some, if the real murderer turns up. I've got a hunch there's more to this thing than shows up on the surface, an' there's no use takin' chances. Savvy?" Bob nodded a trifle uncertainly. "I think so

he said. "I hear what you say, of course; I don't like the idea of running under fire."

"Neither do I. But it's the only way, lad. I take it from me that it's necessary an' let it go that. You can come back as soon as we're straightened out a bit. Now you tell me in de every damn thing you know of your dad's affa that might have a bearin' on this business. I ain't got any time to waste. I want to carry news of what's happened to town as soon's I can' you must be outa the way before that."

## CHAPTER V

LIKE many well-formed intentions, however, Regan's plan of being the first to carry the news of the murder to Moondance was never carried out. By the time that he had finished his talk with Bob he had started him off on his ride to the Bar K it was mid-afternoon, and he had proceeded less than a mile on his return journey when he noticed a growing cloud of dust some distance ahead, which, as he watched it, soon dissolved into two fast-riding riders.

Big Tom smiled a little grimly to himself when he recognised the county Sheriff, Luke Flint, and, of course, the men in the world, Cock-Eye Bill Lacy. He guessed at once that they were headed for the scene of the tragedy, and he felt that he understood now, in part at least, why the tinhorn had so openly avoided him that morning. At the time, as has already been mentioned, he had attributed this to the not unnatural aftermath of last night's fracas; now he felt sure that Lacy had been carrying news of the murder to Moondance. And in the light of a certain theory which he had already begun

to piece together this conclusion was not entirely disheartening.

Regan stopped his horse in the middle of the dusty road and waited for the two men to approach.

"'Lo, Luke," he grunted, in response to the Sheriff's greeting—he and Cock-Eye ignored each other entirely. "I was just settin' out to find you. You've heard the news, I reckon? It sure looks like it." He ran an appraising eye over the panting, sweat-stained horses, which the two men had pulled to a halt.

"I reckon," Sheriff Flint answered. "Bill, here, says that Jack Lindsay's dead—murdered, he thinks—an' I figured I'd better take a look at things. I didn't have any idee you was here ahead of me, Tom."

Regan smiled to himself. The officer's thinly veiled hint that explanations were in order was not lost upon him, but he chose to regard it in his own way. He knew perfectly well that Flint did not as yet suspect him of having anything to conceal, but he knew also that the friendship existing between himself and Bob was common knowledge. Furthermore, he did not for an instant doubt that Cock-Eye had seen him when they passed each other that morning and guessed where he was bound. The circumstance which must have been mentioned to the Sheriff. He permitted no inkling of it.



thoughts to show itself upon his face, however ; he had played too much poker to underrate the value of keeping the other fellow guessing. His chief concern at the moment was to find out what Flint knew without in any way committing himself.

"I felt like takin' a ride this mornin'," he explained, with an appearance of easy frankness, so I thought I'd drift out an' see how Bob was ettin' on. I passed Bill on his way to town some hours ago. Bob acted sick last night, kind of. You noticed it, I reckon, Bill ? "

For the first time since their meeting Regan turned his shrewd unreadable eyes squarely upon the tinhorn, smiling inwardly when he noted the swollen jaw which the latter carried as a memento of last night's clash. He guessed that the Sheriff must already have heard of what had taken place, and in his own subtle way he was beginning to discount whatever version Cock-Eye might have given of that encounter.

The ruse worked. Lacy flushed and bit his lip, while Sheriff Flint openly chuckled. Being a man, he enjoyed the thrust, he could appreciate its subtlety, if not its entire significance, but he was a peace-officer, and he felt that the responsibilities of his office must be maintained. His face sobered abruptly.

"Bob ain't home, is he?" he casually inquired, looking at Regan.

"No," Big Tom shook his head. "Jack's phony alone, an' as dead as—as George Washington. Bill's right that far; he sure is. Likewise, I'm here to say it's murder, Luke. I looked around some before I set out to hunt you."

"Any clues?"

"Some. But nothin' conclusive. The evidence, such as it is, looks to me like it might be frame-up," Regan replied, determined not to commit himself until Flint had examined the premises and voiced his own opinion. He did not miss an almost imperceptible lifting of Lacy's eyebrows.

Sheriff Flint, however, did not appear to catch the signal—if it was a signal. He ruminated for an instant. Then:—

"Reckon we'd better drift," he remarked, and touched his horse with the spurs.

At the ranch the three dismounted and tied their horses in silence; each occupied with his own thoughts. Then Regan led the way into the living room, where he pulled aside the blanket with which he had covered the corpse just before he left.

"Seemed more decent to cover him," he explained. Sheriff Flint nodded, but said nothing. Under ordinary circumstances, he was a man of few words, and he stood silent now, look-

down at the dead man with gaze as inscrutable as Regan's own. He was a tall man, was Flint, as tall as Big Tom, but not so massive; lean, with a smooth shaven face that was tanned to the appearance of saddle leather, and a thin-lipped mouth which worked constantly upon a quid of tobacco. The man's most noticeable feature was a pair of steel-blue eyes that had a trick of becoming glassy and lifeless whenever their owner lost himself in thought. An expression which somehow tended to produce an air of indifference, whereas, in reality, it denoted the most acute interest.

The Sheriff's were glassy now as he stood just inside the door of the living room, his legs slightly spread and his thumbs hooked into his belt, studying the dead man and the room in which he lay. A little to his left, Cock-Eye fingered his hat, which he had removed in the presence of the dead, darting furtive glances from his crooked eyes in all directions; while Regan missed nothing of what went on from a position near the centre table.

No words were spoken during the several minutes Sheriff Flint required to make his examination. At last.

"It's murder, all right," the Sheriff pronounced, coming suddenly to life and producing a plug of very black tobacco, from which, after he had cleared his mouth of the remains of a former quid, he bit

n

off a liberal chunk. "Murder and robbery, looks like to me. Eh, Tom?"

Regan nodded.

"I wouldn't wonder, but I ain't so sure about the robbery part, Luke. The safe's not busted any an' we can't say yet for sure if anything has been stolen. Bob can check up an' tell you that, reckon. He'd know what was in it, likely."

"Mebbe." Sheriff Flint's tone seemed a trifle dry, as he settled his quid in his cheek. He flashed a quick look at Regan, then cleared his throat with a harsh rasping sound.

"Don't it strike you funny, Tom, that Jack Lindsay should be snuffed out this away, and like that—with a post-maul?" He glanced down at the maul, which Regan had thought best to bring downstairs and deposit on the floor near the body.

"Sure it does. But then, murder's most generally odd, Luke. It'd hardly ever happen other wise."

"Cert'nly not. I wasn't mean'n that exactly Tom. I was thinkin' back to what happened at your place last night. I heard of it this mornin'. There's several besides Bill here who say that Bob was kind of—well, loco yesterday, an' some say he's been heard to threaten his dad more'n a few times lately. Now, if he'd come home drunk or something, he *might* have done this, now mightn't he?"

It don't just look like a *pre*-meditated job to me, Tom. That maul ain't exactly the thing a man would choose for a killin' weapon if he picked it out deliberate, but if it was a-layin' handy he might grab it up in sudden anger, or to defend himself with. Likewise, when a man's drunk, or sick, he does queer things sometimes. This room sure looks like there'd been considerable of a tussle. Under the circumstances, as we know 'em, ain't it possible, or even likely, that Bob an' Jack locked horns ? "

"Possible—yes, maybe," Regan grudgingly admitted ; "but not anyways likely, Luke ; not to my notion. I get your point, of course, but you don't know Bob like I do. Drunk or sober—an' he wan't drunk last night—that boy never murdered anybody, least of all his own dad. It's true, I know, that the pair of 'em didn't team very well. But murder ? Hell's bells ! Besides, you figure the evidence different than I do. There wasn't a fight here. The room's just been framed to look that away, is all. If you'll look close you'll see that Jack was killed right there where he sits. He sure was. An' he never moved after he was struck neither."

"Mebbe. But that don't prove Bob innocent, does it ? " was the Sheriff's swift retort. " You mustn't let friendship blind you, Tom. I hope

you're right, at that. Understand me tryin' to hang this job on Bob; you but it's my business to sift things. Bill Bob in the neighbourhood early to-day, that he got his horse from the livery b town about midnight. He was seen. would he go at that time o' nig home?"

Regan remained outwardly serene setback to his hope of immediately freeing friend from suspicion. His self-control against all such blows; but he wince at the indication that Flint had already build up a case against the dead man had hoped for tolerance, at least, but he what practically amounted to open host

"Well, what of it?" he argued. Bob did come home. Does that prove Luke? He might have gone again killin', or he might have done a half a d As for what Cock-Eye says: Hell's man's a natural born liar an' a crook to an' he's got dam good reason to hate caught him cheatin' at cards last night a up. Surely you ain't takin' Cock-Eye's rious matter like this, Luke. An' an s Cock-Eye doin' out here early t himself, huh? Seems to me the

one explanation to be had before the vote's polled an' counted in this case."

The Sheriff was just opening his mouth to reply, when Lacy interrupted him.

"I've already told my story," the tinhorn burst out heatedly, "an' I'm tellin' you now, Tom Regan, that I won't stand here to be insulted by you or no man. I saw Bob this mornin', I did; it's a fact. He was just enterin' that clump of cottonwoods across the crick when I come up over the sand ridge. Of course, he was a good piece off, but I'd know the swing of that bay pacer of his two mile way. He acted like he wasn't huntin' no publicity. oo; he sure did.

"Me, I came here this mornin' to see Jack Lindsay. had business with him. It was Jack hired me to stack the cards on Bob so's to get him in wrong an' make him quit gamblin', which same he's been doin' too much lately accordin' to his dad's notion. You see, I wasn't so doggone crooked as you figured last night, Regan. I had reasons for the play I made."

"Reasons? Yes, I see. I sure do!" Regan's voice was heavy with sarcastic contempt. "You're had reasons, you skunk, a-plenty of 'em, specially now that the only man who could contradict you is dead. It's funny you never thought to mention some of these same reasons last night."

"It ain't neither. It's no such of a thing. promised Jack—I was to be paid for keeping quiet an' there wasn't time anyhow. I don't play crool cards, Regan. Not regular."

"You're dam tootin' you don't, not in my place. Big Tom retorted, inwardly a little disturbed by Lacy's ready account of his actions, which struck the big man as being too extraordinary to be entirely fictitious. Still, he knew that the gambler liar or was at least mistaken, when he said that he had seen Bob that morning.

"But there's no use to argue," he went on, in a calmer tone. "Bill's right about one thing. Luke. He had to be. A man can't lie *every* time he speaks. Bob was not himself last night. I'm sure wasn't. I never saw him when he appeared to feel so ornery. But that don't mean for sure that he done murder. Not by a long jump it don't. Me, I figure somebody's taken advantage of his condition to try to frame this killin' on him. He done a pretty good job too, too darn good. They got bloodstains all over the house—on Bob's bed and stairs, an' all. Looks like there's been a fight. Bob was hurt, you'll say. Right. But it's no plain. It ain't natural. Besides . . ."

Regan paused impressively for an instant; then he went on:—

"The evidence—the true evidence, Luke—sh



that Jack was killed right there where he is. He never moved after he was hit ; he couldn't have ; an' from the position he's in it don't look like he was movin' just before he was hit either. It's more likely he was asleep, or just helpless drunk. Therefore, it ain't likely he took part in any scrimmage. There's no call for the room to be wrecked this way a-tall. It ain't natural. I tell you Luke, it's all a frame-up to put Bob in bad an' cover the real murderer's trail. It sure is."

"Mebbe so ; mebbe you're right, Tom," Sheriff Flint vouchsafed. "That's for the court to settle—not us." He shifted his quid and spat accurately into the fireplace. "There's evidence upstairs, you say. H'm. Let's take a look around. Time enough to argue later on."

## CHAPTER VI

IN the bedroom which Regan had already examined and which now, except for the post-maul and bloodstained hat (Bob had worn the latter when he rode away), was exactly as Big Tom had found it, Sheriff Flint looked around with the painstaking care of a man who realised to the full the importance of thoroughness. Since the hat and the maul were not there there was nothing in the room to directly implicate its owner, except, of course, the bloodstains but in the mind of any unprejudiced observer the latter were damaging enough. However, both Sheriff and Lacy refrained from comment. They preserved a wooden, and—on the Sheriff's part at least—an ominous silence during the period of examination; but Regan did not miss the knowing glance or two which flashed between the pair, and he drew his own conclusions.

Standing near the doorway, outwardly about as expressionless and devoid of emotion as the wall behind him, the big man followed Flint unceasingly with his eyes as the latter pried into every nook and corner of the room. He saw the Sheriff test

his finger several of the larger blood spots, evidently in an effort to determine their freshness; watched him overhaul the contents of the closet, wondering meanwhile what the officer would say were he informed that the maul had recently been hidden there, and came to a sudden resolution.

"The man who done this, whoever he is, was pretty well acquainted hereabouts, seems like," he observed. "Jack Lindsay didn't have so many visitors here at the ranch. That ought to help some to narrow down the search."

"Uh-huh!" The Sheriff grunted non-committally. Cock-Eye looked up quickly.

"It's just one more count agin Bob, I'll say," he volunteered. "This don't look like a frame-up to me."

"I wasn't askin' your opinion, Bill," Regan retorted gruffly. "If I was I might suggest that you know the house pretty near as well as Bob n' that you knew that Bob was actin' queer last night. You'd better keep your tongue in your cheek. You sure had."

Sheriff Flint paid no attention to this by-play. Satisfied at last that he had exhausted the possibilities of the bedroom, he followed with his eyes the trail of bloodspots which extended across the painted floor and out into the hall. Hands thrust deep to his pockets, shoulders sagging, lips moving

mechanically upon his quid, he contemplated them for several minutes, what time Regan would have given much to read his thoughts. Suddenly the Sheriff lounged out into the hall and crossed it to the room opposite, into which he peered. Finding this room empty of everything except its customary furniture, he backed out and moved along the hall to the next.

Regan and Lacy followed him idly, as men would under such circumstances. Neither they, nor the Sheriff himself, for that matter, expected that anything important or unusual would be discovered, but the tragedy had filled them all with a sense of expectancy, and it was part of Flint's usual routine to thus begin his investigations. As it happened, Regan had not previously more than glanced into any of the rooms with the exception of Bob's, having been too deeply occupied with other matters. In fact he had not opened the door of the closet room at all, but had simply taken it for granted that it concealed nothing of especial interest. Unlike the Sheriff, it was not his duty to make a formal and in some measure perfunctory, search of the premises, and he tagged along now merely because the others went.

Like the first, the second of the three bedrooms proved to be empty and undisturbed in any particular; in fact, from their appearance it was plain

hat these rooms were seldom, if ever, occupied. The third, located at the end of the hall, and opposite the head of the stairs, was Jackson Lindsay's own apartment, a large corner room in the front of the house. When Sheriff Flint pushed the unlocked door of this room open and stepped inside he started back and stopped short in his stride, as a man almost invariably will when greatly shocked. Close behind him, Regan and Lacy peered over his shoulders; then they also froze as motionless as bronze.

As has been said, the room was commodious. It was furnished with a high, old-fashioned dresser, two chairs, a chest of drawers, a small table, littered with cigar ends and an empty glass or two, and a double bed of some dark wood. The floor was partly covered with Indian blankets in place of rugs, the plastered walls were splotted and dingy from time and lack of care. At the moment of their entrance the shades of the two windows were partly drawn, so that only a dim twilight prevailed, but even so there was light enough for the three men to distinctly see the ghastly figure which lay on its back across the top of the disordered bed. A still, stark figure that looked up at the dingy ceiling with wide, unseeing eyes—the dead body of a woman! For a considerable interval thereafter—not once did the three men was aware of the passing of time—

one might have heard a fly crawl in that room. Nobody moved, nobody said anything, even the rhythmic, mechanical action of the Sheriff's slow masticating jaws ceased abruptly, as if the sight he saw had paralysed his facial muscles.

To some slight extent, perhaps, less startled than the others—for, though he had supposed her long since gone, he had at least some previous knowledge of this woman's presence at the ranch—Regan was the first to recover his self-command. He took a short step or two forward and peered down at the body on the bed.

She lay almost flat on her back, fully clothed in a thin, short skirted, low necked dress of some gray stuff, which contrasted strangely with the chalk-white pallor of her skin and the blue-black of her disordered hair. One hand lay clenched across her body, the other was flung out at arm's length; her legs were drawn up beneath her in a convulsive knot, so that, even before one looked closely at her face, one saw plainly that she had died hard, albeit there was no blood or other evidence of violence. But it was the woman's face that held the gaze of Tom Regan and his two companions.

That the face had once been pretty in a bold, rather defiant way there was no doubt, for even now in death the moulding of its features was symmetrical and almost fine; but something other than death

robbed it of the thing that is every woman's bright. It was the face of a woman of not more than thirty, though it looked years older now, dull save for splotches of rouge on the cheeks, the lips drawn back over the bluish gums in a rid snarl. And from this painted, death-stamped mask the wide open sea-blue eyes protruded, like eyeballs stuck in a lump of wax.

It was not a pretty sight. Even those rough men, all of whom had been more or less familiar with its appearance in life and who had seen death in many forms, were a little appalled by it. It retained dignity, somehow; the dignity which death often brings out even in the lowest. And in her, poor plaything, this woman had sunk low. She had tasted of the dregs; they all knew that; even her burnt-out complexion and tawdry finery did proclaim that fact in death more plainly even than in life. It did not require those broad blue stains of clutching finger marks on her neck and throat to convince any one that she had been murdered.

"It's Katie Sturgis, Luke," Regan turned to the Sheriff, and when he spoke his deep voice was strangely hushed. "I'd heard that she—that she'd been pretty friendly lately. But I'd never guessed . . ."

Clint nodded absently. He was still a trifle

dazed, it seemed. Then all at once he shook himself together and his lean jaws resumed automatically the movement which seemed their chief occupation in life.

"Katie Sturgis," he repeated. "'High-Lil' Kate—well, I'll be damned!"

"Yes, it's Kate all right," Cock-Eye also found his tongue. "God! She sure died hard, boy. She sure did. She cashed just like she lived. T—floozie!"

Turning with the light agility of a cat, for all his bulk, Regan fastened his suddenly blazing eyes upon the tinhorn.

"Shut up!" he grated. "She was that—y. We all know it. But she was a woman first. ain't for the likes of you to throw dirt at her—no Savvy?"

Cock-Eye subsided instantly. He made no audible reply, but he flushed and moved a little to one side so that Sheriff Flint's lean figure was interposed between himself and the big man. For then onward, what time they were all in the hall together, he took Big Tom's advice literally. He kept still.

Sheriff Flint had no eyes for either of his companions. He was examining those ugly welts on the dead woman's throat. From them his glassy eyes roved slowly over the disorder



ed and around the room. Finally he looked at Regan.

"She was strangled, Tom," he declared. There's no other hurt, so far's I can see. Some time last night, I reckon. She's cold, an' stiff as a plank. It seems Jack ain't the only one. It happened right here on the bed, from the looks of things. 'm!" He turned to stare at the corpse again, still chewing tobacco as mechanically as a cow chews her cud; but it was plain that he was more disturbed now than he had been even when he first laid eyes on Lindsay's remains.

Regan nodded, and stooped to disengage the dead woman's clenched fingers. It was not easy. The pointed nails had dug deep into the soft flesh of the palm, and for a moment, despite his strength—for he did his best to be gentle—the big man found it a task of it. Then he succeeded. The stiffened fingers were partly straightened out, revealing blood-smearred nails and something else. The latter was a tiny wisp of dun-gray hair which Regan picked up carefully. For a moment both he and the sheriff eyed it closely. Then they looked at each other in silence.

"It was Jack, Tom: he must have done this," the sheriff Flint said slowly, after a little. "That looks like his hair; it's pretty plain evidence. They must have quarrelled, or something, an' Ja

croaked her before he got his. That's logical, no ain't it ? ”

“ Looks that way, Luke,” Regan admitted ; and in his voice there was a certain relief. “ It sure does. That's Jack's hair, all right. We can prove it for sure, maybe, by these marks on her throat. His fingers ought to match up with 'em if he choked her. But who killed *him* ? That's what's bothering me. Seems to me this helps to throw the scene away from Bob—it sure does. Looks like some friend of Kate's might have been mixed up in it accordin' to my notion.”

“ Uh-huh ! ” The Sheriff rubbed his ear thoughtfully. “ I dunno, Tom, I dunno. No use travelling too fast until we know we're on a straight road. It's gettin' late. I've got to go back to town and tend to a few things ; then I'll be back out here with the Coroner. You'd better stay maybe till I come. You can consider yourself sworn in as my deputy for to-night, anyhow.”

## CHAPTER VII

It was dusk by the time Sheriff Flint and Lacy got away on their ride to Moondance, and Regan's first act after they had gone was to feed the livestock and attend to other necessary chores about the place. Then he built a fire in the kitchen stove and cooked himself some supper. Since he did not expect the Sheriff to return with the Coroner before early morning, he could count on several hours of uninterrupted study and investigation of the premises, and the opportunity was just what he wanted. As he ate his supper his mind was busy planning and trying to work out an answer to what promised to be about the knottiest problem he had ever tackled.

From the very first he had realised that his task must prove exceedingly difficult, the more so because to a large extent he must work alone and in secret. Sheriff Flint had already made it evident that he suspected Bob of being at least implicated in his brother's death, and knowing the Sheriff, Regan guessed that the official investigation, in the beginning at any rate, would be confined chiefly to tracing

the missing youth. In other words, as Big Tom saw it, Flint would probably ignore everything except the obvious, he was like that, he lacked imagination, but once started, as he had often proved he was a veritable bulldog for tenacity, and he had enough of the bloodhound in his composition to make him an adept at trail following.

Still, Regan was not particularly worried over the probability of his young friend's apprehension. He had considered all that in the beginning, and it had been no part of his plan to make the boy seem guiltier than he already was by a complete disappearance. On the contrary, he was fully aware that eventually Bob must return to clear himself of the charge which probably would soon be made against him ; but in the meantime much might happen. Being in another state, the Bar Ranch, where Bob had gone, was beyond jurisdiction of the local authorities, and even if he were arrested there the suspected man could not be brought back without formal extradition, and all this would take time. Plenty of time, or so Regan had hoped, for the discovery of evidence which would prove the case against the boy to be the deliberate fabrication his friend believed it to be. By now, however, Big Tom realised that the mystery was more complex than he had thought at first. The discoveries which had been made since Bob

departure had introduced a new and unforeseen complication, and, although he was still confident of being ultimately successful, Regan had begun to anticipate a long-drawn out-chase.

The unexpected discovery of the woman's body had added an entirely new angle to a problem that was already baffling in many ways. Not that it had increased the mass of circumstantial evidence against Bob—for, as he had already remarked to Lindsay, Regan felt that, if anything, it was an argument in the boy's favour, but certainly it had widened the field in which they must search. That attested wisp of hair in the dead woman's fingers was fairly conclusive proof that she had engaged in a struggle with the dead ranchman; and knowing them both, especially the latter, when under the influence of liquor—for that they had been drinking was gathered easily from the bottles and glasses in the living room, as well as what Bob had told him—Regan did not doubt that the woman had been singled by Lindsay himself. But who had killed Lindsay? Had there been a third party present during the former crime and had this person afterwards taken summary vengeance upon the murderer, had . . . ?

When he reached this point in his reflections Tom shook his head. For the present, at any rate, the answer was beyond him. He had a va-

theory, perhaps, several of them, but that was a  
For one thing, after a careful examination of the  
partially emptied glasses, he had almost decided  
that at least three different people had recently  
used them. And then there was something else.

Those horse tracks at the hitching rack in front  
of the house. Had they any direct connection with  
the tragedy? In spite of the fact that he had never  
seen fit to call Sheriff Flint's attention to them, and  
that the officer had not noticed them himself, Regan  
rather thought that they had. To him the tracks  
seemed to prove that Bob had not been the only  
arrival at Half Moon Ranch during the night. Two  
others had come and gone again. Who were they?  
Kate Sturgis and Bill Lacy perhaps, that was one  
solution. But Bob had said that the woman had  
been in the house in the afternoon, and the tracks  
had been made since the beginning of dewfall, or  
not much earlier than the previous midnight.  
Furthermore, if Kate had ridden to the ranch  
recently—and the clothing she wore did not indicate  
this—what had become of her horse? If it  
had been there at all it had disappeared before  
Regan's advent. And last, but by no means least,  
what had become of the bay pacer which Bob had  
ridden home from town? It had not been at the  
ranch when they had looked for it that afternoon.  
Horse, saddle, and bridle—all had disappeared.

Had they gone by means of the same mysterious agency which had transported their unconscious owner to his bedroom, or was the saddled horse merely wandering somewhere at large? At any rate, Bob had been obliged to equip himself with a new outfit from the barn and corral before he started for the Bar K.

In partial answer to all this Regan was not long in concluding that Bob had been assaulted by some one—witness the bruise on his head, which would also account for his unconsciousness and loss of memory—and that this unknown person, who may have been the murderer, had stolen the horse and its equipment.

To further substantiate this theory there was Cock-Eye's story of the horseman he had glimpsed that morning, whom he had taken for Bob. For much as he disliked and distrusted the tinhorn, Regan was forced to admit that he might have told the truth here, although since Bob had been in bed and unconscious at the time, the yarn had looked decidedly fishy. Now, however, it seemed barely possible that Lacy had seen the real murderer in the very act of making his getaway. That is, of course, on the assumption that the whole story was not a pure fabrication of Lacy's own. For Regan was by no means overlooking the possibility that the gambler might be the murderer himself.

Considering all these details and several others of perhaps less intrinsic value, Regan made a final round of the barn and corrals and turned back again toward the house. By then it was full dark, that soft velvety darkness of the Big Horn country in late August, and even in his preoccupation, Regan was for a moment struck by the incongruities of life: the evening hush was fallen upon a world as placid and empty of disturbing influence as it must have been long before the advent of man. Except for his own horse munching contentedly in the barn, a colt or two in the corral, the pigs squealing and jostling each other at their trough, and the long-drawn-out bawling of a steer somewhere in the pastures, there was no sign of animal existence. But in the house scarce a stone's throw away a man and a woman lay stiff and stark, the victims of brutal violence.

Back in the living room once more, Big Tom frowned thoughtfully as he loaded his corncob and stared by the light of the newly filled lamp at the shrouded body of the ranchman.

"It's too bad, Lindsay," he said aloud, his deep voice sounding strangely harsh in the empty house. "It sure is. Of course, I can't say I pity you much you lived mean always, an' if the evidence don't you went out with a dirty murder on your soul, u had it comin' to you; but it's too bad you



couldn't have cashed in without smirchin' that fine young son of yours. But maybe he's not your son a-tall. I dunno. I've heard rumours, an' I never could see any likeness much. But that's as may be. You've cashed an' left a heap of trouble an' mystery behind you, an' I guess it's up to me to sort it out. I've got to clear Bob somehow. [sure have."

For the remainder of the evening until bedtime, Regan spent the hours making as thorough and complete an examination of the ranch house as was humanly possible. It was late by the time he called it "a day," and when he sat down in the living room for a final smoke he knew that he had missed nothing which could help him in his task. Still, at the same time, he was obliged to confess that he had found little that was new. The safe, lying open and practically empty in its corner, held nothing of especial interest, the various rooms were barren of clues other than those already noted; the dead knew perhaps, but could not tell. It was idle that grew and grew, the more one thought on it the deeper and more profound it seemed. Since it was just barely possible that Sheriff At might elect to return during the night, and be in such an event he wanted to be on hand ready, Regan did not actually go to bed, he preferred to sit, or rather, to recline in one of the

living room arm-chairs, smoking and thinking, listening to the commonplace noises of the night. Though somewhat tired physically, he was mentally alert, too alert for sleep, and he left the lamp turned low so that he could see into all parts of the room, although he was himself in a shadow caused by the high back of his chair and a jutting corner of the fireplace. For a long time he smoked and pondered. A coyote howled somewhere in the surrounding hills; the night wind rose and soughed softly around the house; a board creaked now and then; but that was all.

At last, beginning to feel drowsy, Regan settled comfortably back in his chair and closed his eyes.

He had not slept long, only a few minutes, he thought, when he awoke with a start to find the room in complete darkness. The lamp had gone out of its own accord, he decided, after a short period of listening was productive of no more disturbing sound than the slow, regular ticking of the clock.

Then, all at once, he became tense and alert. Some heavy, soft-breathing creature was stealthily moving about in the dark room. Without making a sound Regan sat up and gathered himself together in readiness of instant action. The stealthy shuffling continued, receded at first, then came nearer. The intruder seemed, as nearly as the listener could tell

to be stealing across the living room, feeling his way very carefully and slowly. The room was so dark that Regan could not distinguish a thing, not even a shadow, and he dared not move until he could gain some definite idea of just what he had to contend with. Almost holding his breath, he waited.

The faint rustling went on. Once there was a soft thud, and the listener grinned. He guessed that the prowler had stubbed his toe against something. Poised, tense as a bowstring, he held himself ready for any contingency. For a space it was very still: the "tick-tock-tick-tock" of the old-fashioned clock sounded like the blows of a hammer. Then the breathing and rustling began again. Soon came a dull metallic clang, like the restrained striking of steel against steel; then silence once more.

An instant later something light and fluttery as the wings of a moth touched the listener's elbow.

The big man turned noiselessly, quick as a flash, and his right hand darted out and fastened upon the thing which had touched him. It was a man's arm, naked, sinewy, he knew that instantly; but as his fingers had barely closed around it when there was a convulsive jerk and something hot stung across Regan's shoulder.

Ducking instinctively, Regan twisted hard at the wrist he held, but his grip slipped somehow.

and before he could regain it in the darkness the intruder was out of reach. There was a rattle of hurried footsteps on the bare floor, a door slammed then silence.

Big Tom groped his way to the table and relighted the lamp. He found the living room just as he had last seen it; the dead man starkly outlined beneath the blanket in the chair; everything just as it had been. No! Wait! The safe door which had been wide open earlier in the evening was closed now, and when he darted across the room to try, Regan found that the combination had been thrown. The door was locked!

## CHAPTER VIII

WHEN his horse pushed through the scattered fringe of jack-pines which grew at the base of the mountain trail, and of his own accord halted and began to crop hungrily at the rich grass, Bob Lindsay let the reins hang loose and looked around as he had looked on previous occasions from this same vantage point. But now his gaze was brooding, dark, the gaze of one who sees only through a kind of mental haze or fog, as those see whose vision is distorted by grief or trouble.

The view he beheld was striking enough to make him almost forget, momentarily at least, the bitterness which filled him, although his pausing now was more the result of habit than of anything else. Some time had been, now many months gone by, when he had ridden this way frequently, and never in those former rides had he failed to halt just here and gaze down upon what to him was one of the grandest views in all the Big Horns. On either side and for a short distance in front of him was a narrow strip of almost level grassland, treeless except for the bordering of pines, and shadowed

by rugged peaks that reached up toward the calm blue sky like turrets of Cyclopean walls. Straight ahead, beyond the strip upon which the horse and rider stood, the land sloped sharply for many hundreds of feet to the bottom of a winding valley, and through this valley ran a narrow creek, shaded by cottonwoods and aspens, sparkling like spilled quicksilver in the sunlight.

The valley was long, twisting, and of irregular width: extending to five miles, or a little less, at its lower end, and contracting to a mere gorge at the base of the mountain from which it sprang. On all sides the country was extremely mountainous; high peaks rose everywhere, save only in the places where the mouths of canyons showed dark and gloomy between overhanging crags.

"Some country!" Bob was thinking, in half-unconscious admiration, after he had looked long in all directions. "No taint of society and no contaminating influences here, everything just about as nature made it in the beginning. There's grass for fifty thousand cattle on these slopes and shelter enough to take 'em through the hardest winter Montana ever knew. No wonder the Bar K was noted for its livestock. Desolate and lonely it may be, but this little corner of the earth comes mighty near to being a stockman's Paradise."

He looked off toward the upper end of the valley

where a dimly perceptible cluster of buildings showed the location of the ranch he had just named.

"Lonely is right," he mused on. "A hundred miles from nowhere, so to speak, and mighty few neighbours. But Dad has his own good reasons for choosing it. As for me . . ." His thoughts veered suddenly and he scowled. Then: "I've got no kick coming, I guess," he muttered grimly. "It means life at least."

He gathered up the reins. "Come on, Derby," he said to his horse, "we'd better be drifting, old son, if we mean to sleep at the Bar K to-night."

Thus abruptly taken from his feast, Derby crossed the strip of comparatively level ground and began to pick his way with almost cat-like daintiness down the steep slope which extended to the valley bottom. His master continued to look around him as he rode. He idly calculated the numbers of cattle which the valley could support, for like all stockmen he saw land only in terms of cows and calves. Then, as his body swayed loosely to the rise and fall of his horse's back, he fell once more to speculating upon the horror which had brought him into this forgotten corner of the world.

Mechanically, as it had done so many times before during the course of his ride, his mind reverted to the tragedy at Half Moon Ranch, to the horror which he believed now would never entirely leave

him again so long as he lived. At first, buoyed by Regan's hearty encouragement and pointblank refusal to believe in the guilt which to his own mind seemed so horribly certain, Bob had been almost eager to reach his destination and begin the fight to exonerate himself, but now at near the end of his journey his hope that he might eventually be cleared, feeble at best, had begun once more to give place to something even worse than doubt.

Somehow those hours of rough and dangerous travelling along trails which any other than a mountain bred horse like Derby could never have negotiated at all had impressed upon the rider the futility of trying to run, or hide from, or even to combat, the consequences of this jolt which Fate had dealt him. More and more as the hours sped he realised the seeming hopelessness and horror of the tangle that enmeshed him. His feverish eagerness to "get there" had long since vanished before something more potent than physical danger or hardship; he no longer tried to hurry in place where a single false step would have plunged both himself and his horse into some deep abyss; he knew now that he ran from something as inexorable as death itself.

Many times during his journey through the mountains he had almost decided to turn back and give himself up to the thing that men call Justice



fact, he would most certainly have done so had not been for his promise to Regan and a vague hope that after all some proof of his innocence might yet turn up. His innocence! Bob smiled bitterly and shook his head whenever the word occurred to him. How could he ever hope to convince any one of his innocence when he himself knew that he must be guilty? He was—in the letter of the law, at any rate—a murderer. A parricide!

Day and night, hour after hour, the word sang in his mind and danced before his eyes, for try as he would he could not hush the voice of his conscience. It persisted in accusing him, even though his most strenuous efforts to do so had failed to obliterate all a single memory of the deed itself. But he was guilty. He must be. Hadn't he seen the evidence of his guilt as plain as print before his eyes? To be sure, Regan had declared that it was the deliberate fabrication of some enemy, but for a while he had tried to make himself believe that. But he was cooler now, he had had time to think. A frame-up? Rot! The mere idea of such a thing was absurd. Keen, shrewd, almost unnaturally acute in most things, Tom Regan had once allowed sentiment to warp his judgment. He had no real enemy whom he could think of, and besides, the idea was too fantastic. Better

to logically account for the crime as he did himself. He was guilty.

This admission of Bob's, however, did not include a knowledge or premeditation of the murder. He was no coward. He could face facts. But as to explaining them . . .

In hospital over there in France, convalescing from the after effects of what, for lack of a better name, the doctors had called "shell-shock," he had heard many stories of the curious tricks of which one's mind, or inner self, is capable. Take, for example, the strange actions of the somnambulist who, as every one knows, gets up at night *without awaking*, leaves his room, goes downstairs, wanders about the house, goes out doors even, and after having committed certain acts or accomplished certain work, returns to his room, undresses and goes to bed again, without being in any way aware the next morning of what he has done. Such freakish things and others even more incredible were taking place somewhere every day, Bob learned, and if one admitted such to be a fact was it not equally feasible to suppose that in some condition akin to somnambulism he had himself killed a man without knowing it? Of course it was, he kept telling himself, and yet—and yet . . .

As the distance between the horseman and the ranch gradually shortened, the huddle of buildings

which had looked so tiny from afar began to take on size and shape, though still distant, and soon each familiar detail became clear to the traveller's gaze. He noted how the barn and corrals had been grouped between the house and the base of an overhanging cliff, so that they were protected from winter winds and snows, and he noted also the substantial structure of the house itself: its heavy log walls and slab roof, with the wide veranda on three sides. Sheltered as it was by the cliff and cut off from direct approach by a bend of the creek the ranch had almost the appearance of a fort.

The rail turned sharply and dipped behind a little knoll so that the group of buildings was blotted from sight, and once more the horseman was surrounded by a wilderness, as complete as though no dwelling existed within a hundred miles. "Come on, Derby," he urged, and lifted his tired horse into the fox trot, or ambling lope, so much affected in that region.

"Life is a queer thing," he reflected as he rocked along. "Here I am, twenty-four years old, a married man, practically an outcast, whereas a few years ago I suppose almost any one in Moondance would have envied me. I had a future then. Apparently, now . . ."

Just here his thoughts were startlingly interrupted

for from around the edge of a thick clump of cotton-woods which grew between the knoll and the creek there suddenly appeared a most extraordinary sight. Over the crest of a rise of land some two hundred yards or so away, a woman came wildly running, and after her, with head down and tail angrily erect, a half-grown bull was charging. The girl was still some fifty yards ahead of the bull and running exceedingly well in Bob's direction, towards a huge boulder about half-way between them ; but it was plain that she could not win the race. A few seconds passed—the bull was close behind now. God ! Bob turned faint and caught his breath as he rode furiously to intercept the raging animal ; then the girl swerved sharply, and the wicked horns missed their toss by a hair's breadth.

She gained slightly by this, for the clumsy brute could not turn instantly to follow her, but her gain was merely momentary. He was almost upon her once more, and she had just swerved again in her breathless flight, when the horseman arrived within striking distance. Weaponless and without a rope with which to trip and throw the rage-blinded animal, there was but one thing that he could do in time to save the girl, and, practiced horseman as he was, he did this gallantly. His running horse had just come level with the bull's shoulder

when he threw himself bodily out of his saddle and grasped the animal by the horns.

There was a crash, a hoarse bellow of startled rage from the bull, and both man and beast were rolling over and over on the ground, while the girl, winded now to the point of collapse, stopped abruptly in her headlong flight and turned around. More than once before, within certain limitations, Bob had performed the trick which he attempted now, but never when so much hung in the balance or with so little preliminary preparation. On former occasions he had always been surrounded by mounted friends, who, in the not unlikely event of a slip, would come instantly to his rescue, and he had been fresh and ready for the fray; while now he was half worn out to start with and the loss of his grip on those short, slippery horns meant a nasty mauling—perhaps death—for the girl as well as himself.

But he did not lose his hold. He hung on grimly, stubbornly, thrown violently in all directions by the bull's furious lunges, until finally, in response to the skilful pressure he brought to bear, the animal's head turned sharply to one side, so that his nose with its flaring nostrils and lolling pink tongue pointed upward, and his struggles to regain his feet practically ceased. So long as his head could be held firmly in this unnatural position,

Bob knew that he had the brute helpless : it was the simple culmination of the cowboy stunt called "bull-dogging" ; but here there were no waiting horsemen to herd the bull away from his conqueror if he continued to show fight after he was permitted to regain his feet, and no rope to tie him where he lay.

Knowing this, Bob did not cease now his steadily applied pressure and spring clear of the prostrate animal as he would ordinarily have done. On the contrary, he increased it. Slowly but surely he twisted the great head around on its thick neck, using the bull's own weight and lessening struggles as a leverage in his favour ; and suddenly the brute began to bellow throatily from pain and fear. Then all at once the bellowing choked short, there was a dull snap, not unlike the breaking of a rotten stick and a quick shudder ran through the heaving bulk of the animal. Then Bob relinquished his grip and rolled clear, sinking down again the next instant in complete exhaustion.

The bull lay perfectly quiet now, he would never move again, and the girl too was very still—still as death. Bob wondered vaguely if she had died of fright ; he was as yet too weak to go and see and then he fell to gazing at her face, which happened to be turned in his direction. Slowly it dawned on him that she was pretty, although terrible

pale at the moment. A high broad forehead, crowned with dark brown hair, the chin square but soft, the lips firm and well formed, if a trifle full. The eyes he could not see because they were closed, for the girl had fainted; still, the lashes were long, like tracings in soot against the pallor of her cheeks. For the rest she was young—about twenty, he guessed,—small, and slender.

He finally recovered his wind and strength sufficiently to stagger to where she lay, and to begin to chafe her hands between his own. They were small, well-formed hands, though tanned and showing certain signs of labour. At last she opened her eyes—blue eyes, he noted with some satisfaction—and sat up.

"How foolish I feel," she said, with a short, half-hysterical laugh. "I must have fainted."

"It would be strange if you hadn't," Bob assured her, smiling. "I came near it myself. I hope you're none the worse now."

"I think not—just scared almost to death," she answered, returning his smile and lifting both hands to fuss with her hair. "He would surely have red me in another minute. I'd got off my horse to drink at the spring and he charged from the trees before I knew he was around. He's always beer-cious. Uncle has threatened to shoot him several times, but hated to because of his fine blood."

glad you've killed him. It—it was very wonderful."

Bob flushed a little and changed the subject quickly.

"Your uncle?" he repeated questioningly. "You mean David Kent, I presume?"

"Of course. I'm Betty Wilson," she replied, as she stood up and shook out her short skirt. "I think I can guess your name. You're Robert Lindsay of Half Moon Ranch."

"How—how did you know?" Bob was frankly surprised. He had hardly expected the news of his arrival to precede him, nor had he guessed that Kent, who had always lived alone, might have a niece, or any other relative for that matter.

She laughed, showing a double row of pearly teeth. "I've seen you before," she told him, "at Moon-dance—last Frontier Day. You won the steer tying contest then, you know. Also, I've heard my uncle speak of you. It's fortunate for me that it was you and not some bungling amateur who happened along just now."

Bob flushed again. He was a modest youth, and praise of any kind, especially from a woman, always made him uncomfortable; and he had not for an instant forgotten his equivocal position. He wondered what this attractive niece of David Kent's would say if she knew that he was a murderer.



"Oh, I didn't do so much," he smiled. "The trick is not so difficult as it looks, really." Then quickly, to change the subject. "You spoke of your horse, Miss Wilson. Where is he? I see mine has not gone far," and he glanced toward Derby, who was quietly cropping grass twenty yards away.

"He can't be far. I'll get him. Can you walk?" She had, it seemed, already noticed that he was standing with all of his weight upon one foot.

"I think so: I'm not quite sure," Bob replied a little doubtfully. "My ankle seems to have been bunged up a good bit." He limped a yard or two with set lips, only to collapse at last with a grimace of pain. His left ankle had been badly wrenched and was swelling fast, and he was so bruised he could hardly stir. "Afraid I can't make it," he smiled up at her.

"You poor thing! Thank goodness, it's not far to the house. Look, I'm all right. It was silly of me to faint; I'm only a woman, you see. My word, though, I was scared! You must let me help you on to your horse—that is, if you don't mind?"

"I guess I can stand it if you can," he grinned, adopting her own tone of half serious banter, for it helped to ease the strain of the situation. And with a little nod she turned abruptly away to fetch Derby.

## CHAPTER IX

IN spite of the sturdy protests of Tom Regan, who did not let pass a single opportunity to declare his belief in his young friend's innocence, the coroner's jury rendered a verdict of wilful murder against Bob on the next day but one after the discovery of the crime. Still, Regan's arguments had not lacked a certain amount of conviction, and had not been for the mass of circumstantial evidence backed up and strengthened as it was by the apparent flight of the suspected man, there were many who might have questioned the decision, but Bob's disappearance clinched matters. Even the rather extraordinary fact that at daylight of the morning after Regan's midnight adventure the missing man's horse, saddled and bridled, had been found shut in one of the corrals failed to materially alter the opinions of the six "good men and true" who composed the jury. The horse, they argued, had nothing whatever to do with the evidence; some, in fact, even went so far as to hint that Regan had corralled the animal himself. Almost the whole town was roused to a pitch of righteous wrath

against the culprit, and within an hour after the close of the inquest the air was full of rumours of the lynching which Regan had dreaded from the first.

"Hell's bells!" Big Tom reflected, sitting alone some hours after the inquest in his cubby-hole of an office. "Hell's bells! It's sure hard sometimes to figure how the cat'll jump---it sure is. It looks bad right now that Bob ain't here to account for himself; I know that; but if he was here an' told the story he told me. . . . Anyhow, he's alive. That's something. The boy ain't guilty. Dammit, I just know he ain't. But *he* seems to think he is, n' . . . There's been more'n one innocent man hung in a hurry in these parts, an' I never could see that the subsequent regrets of the community done *him* any good. It's sure one big mix-up, darned if it ain't. If we'd had more time to get organised I mighta planned some different, but I ain't. As it is, I reckon I'll keep still about what happened at the ranch last night, for the present anyhow. I've done enough talkin'. There's Bill Macy now---damn his ugly mug! *He* knows more'n I's told, he sure does. But nobody seems to see that away but me. Looks like Bill might have been kind of a stand-in with the Coroner Flint, although I may be wrong. I may at last. Just the same he'll stand investigatin',

Bill will. Guess I'll trail him up a few just for luck."

Lacy, he found upon investigation, after his ejection from the card room that night, had gone straight to a familiar haunt of his own, where, since Prohibition, a thriving trade was carried on in certain contraband liquids which masqueraded under the general name of "moonshine." Here the cross-eyed gambler had taken a drink or so, then he had departed, and from this point until Regan himself had seen him in the foothills the next morning his movements were obscure. His friends, of course, asserted that Cock-Eye had gone home to bed, but since the assertion was not substantiated by the testimony of any creditable eye-witness Big Tom took the liberty of forming his own conclusions. "Nobody but Cock-Eye had a motive for framin' Bob," he told himself; but he kept his own counsel.

True to his character of dogged tenacity, he persevered in his search for dependable clues until he eventually discovered one who had seen Cock-Eye leave town on horseback not long after the time at which he was said to have gone home. But that was all. Here the trail ended definitely, so far at least as any actual witness of the tinhorn's movements was concerned, but it had already proceeded far enough, coupled with what he already knew.

reguessed, to make Regan feel very confident that he was not wasting his time.

Of course, he had not as yet secured any evidence to show that Lacy had actually had a hand in the murder. Cock-Eye might explain everything in a satisfactory manner when put to the question. Still, there was a discrepancy between the story he had told and the facts as Big Tom knew them, and it was an axiom of Regan's that a liar will always be watching. What had Cock-Eye done in the hours between midnight and noon of that eventful day? Had he killed the ranchman and then set the stage to implicate Bob, being aided in this by the fortunate coincidence of the latter's mental collapse, or had he merely kept rendezvous with some accomplice: the mysterious horseman, perhaps, who, according to the evidence, had visited the ranch that night?

"It looks like it, by golly! It sure does," Regan claimed, in answer to his thought. "I wonder how has Luke Flint guessed all the possible of this tinhorn, or does he just don't give a damn? It's a man of one idea, Luke is, an' right now he's set on Bob bein' guilty he won't look anywhere else. H'm! Luke Flint an' Cock-Eye have been pretty thick lately, now I come to think of it. Cock-Eye was right intimate with Jack. At coroner's jury too smelled kinda fishy."

Reckon I better sound Luke out a little—I sure had."

Acting upon this decision, he proceeded to Sheriff Flint's office, determined to employ all the finesse he could command to solve this new riddle, and to insist upon having Lacy arrested, or, at any rate, kept under surveillance until the mystery was cleared up.

The Sheriff, however, did not seem particularly disposed to argue the latter point. Though he had his own reasons for such action as he had thus far taken, he knew that Regan was clever and popular and he was too shrewd and far-sighted to outwardly show jealousy. He spat into the box of sand which did office-duty as a cuspidor and stared at his visitor woodenly for a moment after he had explained part of what was in his mind.

"Think so," he remarked finally. "Well, you may be right at that, Tom. I ain't through with Cock-Eye yet—not by a damn sight! But I'm not sayin' he's guilty either. He tells a pretty straight yarn—in spots anyhow. Just the same I'll keep an eye on him; he'll not run away. But I'd sure like to hear Bob Lindsay's story, if he has one. Seems to me, if I was in his boots—if I murdered a man, I mean—I'd do just what he has. I'd beat it."

"You think he's guilty, then?"

"I ain't exactly said so, Tom, not in so many words ; but it sure as hell looks like he might know considerable. Most everybody is agreed on that, so far's I can learn. Look what happened at the inquest."

"Sure, I know," Regan nodded calmly, "but a coroner's jury ain't infallible, Luke, an' circumstantial evidence is apt to be misleadin'. You know that. The evidence points to Bob, mebbe, but we needn't go into that. It seems to me that there's a whole lot to be considered before we go so far as to hang anybody."

Sheriff Flint frowned and shifted his quid to the other cheek.

"But what's become of Bob?" he demanded, at length. "If he was dead his body'd be found some place, wouldn't it? But he ain't dead. You an' me both know that, Tom."

Plain as was the insinuation in the officer's last words, Regan chose to ignore it. He avoided direct comment by reverting to his original line of argument.

"Cock-Eye's only an accomplice perhaps," he suggested quietly, beginning to load his corn-cob. "I don't think he was alone, Luke. There were other visitors at the Half Moon that night accordin' to my notion. Cock-Eye may be only a cat's-paw for all; but I'm pretty sure he's wise to .

heap. This ain't any chance affair. It's been well planned."

"Sure thing. But Bob mighta planned it as well as anybody. He's no fool, an' you've admitted yourself that he acted funny the other night. He had a lot of cash on him, too. That safe may have been robbed for all we know. Just suppose, for instance, that Bob done the whole job before he came to town at all. Ever think of that? Or suppose he cleaned the safe an' came to town, an' while he was away his dad got wise to his loss. Wouldn't that account for the quarrel that ended in the killin' when Bob went back home? Or lookin' at it another way, mightn't they have quarrelled about Kate bein' there at the house? It looks like that a cinch that Jack killed hisself; but we can't afford to overlook no bet Tom."

"You're right, we can't. But ain't you done just that, Luke? You keep hintin' that there several strings to this fiddle, but up to date you've only really tried to play on one of 'em. Bob'll turn up, I tell you, an' he'll have a story that'll knock all your evidence into a cocked hat, when he does. In the meantime I say you'd better watch Lacy and find out if you can who was with Kate at the ranch that night. We may both of us be barkin' up the wrong stump for all we know."



"Sure," the Sheriff nodded shrewdly, "I'll do that. But so far the evidence don't show . . ."

"To hell with the evidence, Luke!" Big Tom for the first time began to show signs of the strain he was under. "It's all framed, I tell you. Ain't Buck-Eye the only man we know of that has reasons to hate Bob? He *claims* he was the first to find the body—true. But if he was guilty himself could make a neater bid to clear himself than by doin' just that, *after* he had set the stage to point at Bob? That evidence is too damn convincing—it sure is. Ain't natural. Bob's smart. He's got savvy. If he was guilty—which he ain't—he'd never leave up a plain trail, not even if he was drunk. But he wasn't drunk that night. He was just plain drunk!"

"Well, you may be right, at that," Flint granted, apparently not anxious to argue with Regan in his present mood, "but I dunno. I don't put much stock in those hoss tracks, for one thing—they mighta been made by 'most anybody—an' Bill ain't the kind to carry through a play like this by himself. If he killed Lindsay he'd be more likely to beat it, like Bob has."

"He's no kid, Luke; an' he's crooked as a dog's hind leg," Regan said, earnestly. "He's got cause to hate Bob, an' fellers like him'll go far to 'get' a man they hate. I know 'em."

The Sheriff nodded.

"That's true," he admitted, "but it don't reprove much. I'm waitin' until I locate Bob; then we'll see. If the boy tells a straight yarn we'll find him some place else. I'll soon sweat the truth out of Lacy if he knows anything. You watch me."

"Of course. I know you'll do your best, Lu, but you'll not find Bob like you think—tryin' to quit the country. The lad's not far away. He's high-gear'd, nervous, quick-temper'd sometimes like a fine-bred colt in his nature, but he's a coward, an' he's square as square. He'll prove himself innocent yet—he sure will."

"Mebbe. I sure hope so." Sheriff Flint's tone lacked conviction, but it was good-natured. "I'm not bettin' either way just now. I want Bob's story first. He knows a heap; he's bound to tell you know where he is you might send him word to come in. It'd save time."

Regan grinned. The hint was too broad to pass unnoticed, but as before he chose to ignore it. He knew now, however, that the Sheriff had guessed of his meeting with Bob.

"Did it ever strike you," he remarked, "that this killin' might be mixed up some way with Jack Lindsay's bootleggin'? It was on the quiet, of course, but I've heard he did quite a business that line, an' . . ."

Flint gave vent to an ironical little laugh and for the smallest instant his lifeless eyes seemed to blaze.

"'Tain't likely," he grunted, watching his visitor narrowly. "I thought Jack quit that game some time ago?"

"That so. I hadn't heard." Big Tom did not seem to attach much importance to his own suggestion. He stood up and stretched himself. "Guess I'll be on my way," he said. "If I should come cross Bob, I'll tell him you want to see him, Luke. 'long."

## CHAPTER X

AFTER Regan had gone Sheriff Flint crossed his hands behind his head and elevated his feet to the corner of his desk, leaning back in his chair so that his long, loose-jointed figure rested largely upon the small of his back: a posture he invariably adopted as a preliminary to deep and intensive thought. He was thinking now, both hard and fast. His eyes had assumed that peculiarly lifeless appearance so characteristic of them at such times, and he chewed slowly upon the inevitable quid. Barring the monotonous droning of several huge blue flies in the windows, nothing stirred within the room.

Outside the office, the town drowsed through the inertia and stagnation of an unseasonably warm mid-afternoon. Save for a few horses tied here and there at hitching posts and an occasional pedestrian, the dusty main street, which comprised the bulk of the business section, was deserted; it was quiet, too, except for the metallic jangle of mechanical piano which some restless soul was feeding with coins in the Green Front pool hall about midway of its length.

Though his office was almost straight across the street from this Mecca of the unemployed and the cacophonous strains of the jazzy music were distinctly audible therein, the Sheriff did not seem aware of them. He remained buried in his reflections, lost to outer goings on as it were, until he was aroused by the clatter of footsteps on the bare boards of the corridor outside his door, and a man's abrupt entrance.

Dropping his feet to the floor, the Sheriff, who second before might by a casual observer have been supposed to be dozing, whirled about to face the new-comer, and grinned.

"'Lo, Bill," he grunted. "I was just thinkin' bout you. Glad you come in. Set down."

Cock-Eye—for the visitor was the cross-eyed ambler—nodded casually and did as he was told, helping himself meanwhile to a cigar from an open box on the desk. He seemed, somehow, very much at home in the Sheriff's office, too much so perhaps for a man in his present doubtful position. But, of course, he and Flint had been friends for years.

"Thought I'd better see if there was anything new doin'," he observed, after his cigar was drawing nicely. "I seen Regan leave here a while ago."

Sheriff Flint nodded and continued to chew acidly. For a moment neither man said anything further. Then :—

"He was here to ask me to lock you up on suspicion of bein' concerned in Jack Lindsay's death," the man at the desk remarked suddenly, with just a hint of dryness in his tone.

"The hell he was!" Lacy's crooked face warped into a complacent leer. "I suppose you told him you'd oblige."

"Not in that many words," Flint returned, still dryly. "It just happens I can use you elsewhere, but I didn't tell Tom that. I had to hedge a little, of course,—I'm Sheriff, you know; so I told him I'd keep tabs on you an' study into your case some. I aim to do that. He's plumb hostile, Tom is." He chuckled almost noiselessly.

Lacy appeared to have no difficulty in catching the point of this humorous implication. His leering grin broadened and the cast in his eyes became more pronounced than ever.

"I should worry," he remarked sententiously. "I don't aim to beat it anyhow. Not me. So Regan's out to take my scalp. I figured he might be."

"Yep. He sure is. He's hot as I ever see him. He's built up a pretty good case agin you at that Bill. It holds water pretty near as well as . . ." The Sheriff stopped abruptly and shot a significant look toward the open door.

Taking the hint instantly, Cock-Eye rose to his

feet and closed it, after a careful look into the empty corridor. When he returned to his chair and glanced at the Sheriff both men smiled.

"It don't pay to be careless," the latter said presently. "Tom Regan's pretty smart, but I figure we got his number this trip, all right. He ain't got no real idee of the truth, an' if it wasn't for him bein' so interested in young Lindsay I doubt if he'd question a thing. We can handle him, I reckon. It's pretty near a cinch. He aims to run agin me next election, I hear, so if there's any commotion raised I can explain a whole lot by hintin' he's got it in for me along political lines. So long's there ain't any real positive proof he can't do much more'n talk. Besides, the town's mostly with us. Bob sure *looks* guilty."

"He is guilty," Cock-Eye declared. "Didn't I find him laid out on his bed dead to the world, an' his head hurt? I'll say I did! There was a fight between him and Jack; I'm sure of it. But, at that, I wish Tom hadn't seen me on the road. He knows I tried to dodge him, an' I s'pose it looked ish. Tom Regan's no fool—he sure ain't. He's popular too, in this town."

"Popular he damned!" the Sheriff exploded, seemingly touched on the raw by this remark. "It'll take more'n just popularity to carry him long if he don't quit hornin' into other me

affairs. Give him rope enough an' he'll hang him self yet. I'll see Bob don't talk too much once get my hands on him."

"I don't think Bob is wise to so much, it's Regan we gotta watch, Luke," the tinhorn rejoined, eyeing his companion thoughtfully. "It stands to reason that he must know where Bob is—he must of found him at the ranch that mornin'—an' they've cooked up something between them, sure as the world Gosh! It sure was lucky I got there in time to discover what I did. That post-maul, now, I won't be there when I arrived the first time. So far we been packin' rabbits' feet in both hands, but it's a cinch Regan has got something up his sleeve besides his arm, an' if Bob can prove he's not guilty the truth may come out yet."

"Mebbe; but there's no use worryin', Bill. Bob can't know so much, after all, an' Regan can only guess. You're right. It was lucky you got there first. Damn lucky! Me, I'm not askin' who croaked Jack, I don't really care. It looks like Bob, but Shucks! What difference does it make? Jack was drinkin' an' talkin' too much, anyhow. It's a cinch he killed the woman himself, an' with the two of 'em gone there's no witnesses left. I don't think Bob knew much of what his old man was up to."

"Probably not. But just the same I'd feel bett



if he was safe behind the grillwork, Luke. There's no tellin' what him an' Regan may hatch out between 'em. That brain storm of Bob's the other night has played right into our hands, but he's liable to begin to *think* 'most any time now. He may know more'n we figure he does. The whole town thinks he's guilty too. That helps."

"All but Regan, curse him!" Flint ruminated, with a thoughtful scowl. "H'm. It ain't so hard to figure out where Bob is, Bill. He's over to Kent's, I'll bet a blue chip. That's the one place they'd think of in a jam like this. The Bar K's in Montana—I ain't got any authority to make an arrest there, you know, an' we don't want to call heriff Breen into this if we can help it. Regan's wise that Jack had been bootleggin', an' . . ." He paused and looked at Lacy impressively for an instant, then spat into the sand-box. "Tom found Bob at the ranch an' got him away, of course," he added.

Cock-Eye nodded. "Sure, I know," he agreed. "It's a good bet. Just what Regan an' Bob would likely do when they savvied what was ahead—make a safe getaway. It sure is hell the way we've been horned out of the biggest money makin' game we ever drew cards in. Now ain't it?"

"Sure is. An' all because Jack Lindsay couldn't leave booze an' women alone. The poor fool!

I told him that Sturgis skirt was a bad baby. She knew too much. Thank God, he had the sense to croak her before he got his—she can't talk now.

"But I'm not so sure we're plumb outa business, Bill," the Sheriff went on, after a minute. "Of course, it's best to lay low for a spell; but this murder ain't got anything to do with us, that I can see. If we can keep Regan from learnin' too much we're all right. We must do that."

"Sure. But how? You just now said yourself that he knows what Jack was up to."

"Mebbe; but he can be silenced if he does. Right now it seems to me that we hold about all the cards in the deck. We know what Regan is workin' at, while he don't even suspect us—not me, at any rate—an' we should come through fine if we watch our step. Even Big Tom Regan won't dare to fight alone and singlehanded agin' the 'Hoods,' Bill."

"The Hoods! My God, Luke, you don't aim to . . ." Cock-Eye's crooked face was a picture of startled bewilderment as he stared at his companion, afraid, or so it seemed, to finish what he had started to say.

Flint chuckled softly.

"Why not?" he retorted. "Of course, we won't go that far unless we have to, but if Tom gets too damn smart it's the best way to buck him

up. Right now we'll go slow. I want to know how much Bob Lindsay knows, or guesses, first."

"Huh!" Cock-Eye snorted contemptuously, albeit his eyes were uneasy. "I don't see why. He was away half the time, he never knew what Jack was up to, an' even if he did he'd keep still on his own account. Regan's the brains o' that combine, Luke."

"Mebbe," the Sheriff's gaze narrowed cunningly, "but so long as Bob is under suspicion and alive Tom Regan is a-goin' to keep on snoopin'. No tellin' what he might turn up. Get me? Kate knew: she may have talked; an' Bob---he's got his guessin'. I wish I knew he'd never come back an' that he'd keep his mouth shut always. I'd let him stay where he is."

"Why not arrest him anyhow? Damn the law! Nobody'll blame you for exceedin' your authority a bit in a case like this, an' I can fix things so he'll never come to trial. If we can use the Hoods for one thing, why not for another? Pretty near everybody but Regan believes he killed Jack. There wouldn't be no questions asked. It . . ."

"Nope. Too risky." Sheriff Flint hastily interrupted. "We'll just keep tabs on 'em both, till, for the present anyhow. Later on we'll see. Mind you, I ain't be no means certain that Bob is at the Bar K; I've only got a hunch he is. I want

you to drift over that way and poke around a little."

"That's easy," Lacy's eyes sparkled; "but how about Tom, Luke? You said he wants you to look me up. Suppose he sees me headin' for the hills an' the Montana line—he'll figure I'm makin' a getaway, an' raise hell, more'n likely."

"No, he won't. He won't see you for one thing. You'll leave in the night. When you get on to Bar K range, say around Dead Horse Canyon, you can hide out some place—that's a pretty rough country an' you oughta be able to keep an eye on things without showin' yourself much. When Regan finds you've disappeared he'll be surer than ever that you killed Jack, an' he may get careless. He'll think for sure Bob is proved innocent an' he may quit pryin' so much. You can trust me to give him an earful if he comes rarin' around here as he likely will. The whole thing's shaped up so it's playing into our hands in a way. You can get word to the boys to lay low for the present. I may run over that way myself in a few days, it all depends on how things break here in town. I want to keep an eye out myself."

"You'd better," Cock-Eye grinned back. There's some things it don't pay to advertise, an' your business dealin's with Jack Lindsay is one of 'em."

## CHAPTER XI

"Now," said Betty, after Bob had managed, not without difficulty, to lift himself into his saddle and they had ridden for a little while, "I hope you won't think I'm fresh if I ask you a question or two?"

"Certainly not."

"Why have you come to the Bar K?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because I want to know. You've just saved my life, for one thing: I have a pardonable curiosity in my rescuer. Then, you must have an object in riding so far. We don't see many strangers here. The men who do come are a rough lot—most of them. My uncle has little in common with the world: he leads a secluded life. I am a little lonely sometimes, and—well, oh, just because!"

Bob smiled a little at her *naïveté*, he could not help it, but there was just a trace of bitterness behind. Her frankness had aroused thoughts which at the excitement of the moment he had been only too glad to partially forget. He wished that it were possible for him to be as frank in return, to

tell the truth, to make a clean breast of the whole awful business to this honest-eyed girl who gazed at him so unaffectedly. But he knew that he could not do this. The story of the murder was permissible perhaps, it must come out sooner or later in any event, but that other. Ugh! He cringed inwardly at the mere thought of seeing her eyes cloud and turn away from him, as he felt sure that they would if she once guessed the whole of his secret. Since he had chosen to be a sort of fugitive rather than to face the music at Moondance he must play the part. He must dissemble or, at least, tell only enough of the truth to explain his visit.

"I have an object, of course," he replied. "I am sick of the town and town ways. I love the freedom of these hills. I thought that Dad—your uncle—might need a hand, and—I want to forget. Right now in the beginning I may as well tell you that I am not just what I seem. Until very recently I had a future, or thought I had. I was a fool." He smiled again, in open bitterness this time, and turned away his eyes.

She watched him for a moment, then nodded slowly. "I think I understand," she said. "I've learned a good deal since my arrival at the Bar X. You're not the only one who has come up here that way. These mountains are so big, so grand, so clean! Many a soul-weary human has turned

to them for peace and found it in the end. But you're too young to quietly give up—too brave and strong. You should fight!"

Again Bob smothered the smile called forth by her ingenuous way of expressing herself. He saw deeper than she guessed. She had lived solitary with David Kent for so long that she had grown to see life partly through his eyes. It seemed odd in a girl of her youthful appearance, quaint almost. But it added not a little to her charm.

"I know," he told her, "I'm not quitting exactly. It's merely that just at first I'm a bit dazed by it all. It has been so—so sudden. You see, I'm not quite sure if I'm—if I am myself or not. It's a most extraordinary situation."

"What is?" she asked simply. "Tell me?"

Bob glanced at her quickly, startled at the trend their conversation had taken. He had not meant to be so frank. Meaning to dissemble, he had already said too much, or too little, but he was a clumsy liar, and Betty was a very attractive girl. Her somewhat boyish manner by no means detracted from her feminine appeal, and there is something about a woman's sympathy and understanding that holds of a man. This sex attraction (or is it merely subconscious reversion to the days when childhood's troubles were sobbed out on a mother

knee?) accounts for the many secrets which are poured into the ears of wives and sweethearts by men who would suffer torture rather than confess to a fellow male. It is the reason, perhaps, why so few men are heroes at home, why their women folk nod and smile knowingly to themselves when the world applauds some act of virtue.

Bob Lindsay had but recently come to man's estate; his part in the great war had not hardened him; he was still essentially a boy in all but years, and after the mental hell he had experienced it was not strange that Betty's sympathy and interest should go under his guard, or that he should end by telling her all about the murder.

She listened without comment, walking her horse slowly beside his, looking straight ahead until he had finished, and for a few minutes afterward she was silent. Then:—

"It is terrible," she admitted frankly, looking up at him, "very terrible. Still, you've told me nothing that cannot be explained away. You say that the last thing you remember of that awful experience until you awoke in your own room was when everything went black; until then you seem to have been at least vaguely conscious of your surroundings. You believe that you attacked your father when you were, so to speak, unconscious. Perhaps you did; we must admit the possibility, I suppose



## MEN OF MYSTERY

but your friend Tom Regan, a man of experience, does not seem to think so. Neither. The circumstantial evidence against you, as it is, need not be taken at its face value, may, as Mr. Regan thinks, have been deliberately built up by some enemy. Such things happen."

"Perhaps. But I'm afraid not in this case. I have no enemy. None, that is, who would go to such elaborate pains to injure me, nor who knew of my strange mental condition on the night in time to take advantage of it. No one could have known that I meant to return just when I did; I didn't even know it myself. The whole thing--that part of it, I mean, is the purest accident. I have no enemy who could see that I should wander into the room and do what I did."

Betty frowned and bit her lip thoughtfully. "But you must have," she argued. "There's something logical otherwise. Just wait, you'll see. Nothing ever happens without cause. I wish Mr. Regan were here now so that we might talk things over. I've heard uncle speak of him too. He's a most unusual man."

"One of the best," Bob echoed heartily, turning at once to her praise of his friend. "He's a father and mother and something more to

I was a kid. I never knew my mother, you know and my father . . ." He seemed to choke suddenly and turned away his eyes.

The girl said nothing for a moment, watching him covertly. She knew that there was something behind all this, something which to Bob was worse even than the possibility that he was a murderer: so much for intuition. But she asked no further questions, and it was Bob himself who finally broke the silence. Somehow her simple profession of faith in his innocence had encouraged him immensely.

"I've been wondering ever since I left," he remarked, "if I haven't done wrong in running away. That's almost a confession of guilt in itself. Tom, however, seemed to think it best, and at the time I was too beside myself to reason. I just took his word for everything and left."

"If you hadn't arrived just when you did you'd have been too late to save me from that bull," she laughed. "You've had a warm welcome, at any rate. Well, I'm not sorry you took Mr Regan's advice."

Just before this they had accomplished the circuit of the grove, and now they saw the ranch spread out in front of them. Some distance away a man was riding across a meadow in their direction.

"That's uncle," said Betty. "He's just getting home from pasture inspection."

Soon the rider was close enough for them to see him clearly. He was short and thickset, looking as he sat in his saddle almost as broad as he was tall, and evidently as hale and hearty as a mountain pine. His long gray hair grew low down on his neck, and fell back from a prominent brow. His face was traced with veins and tiny wrinkles like the skin of a well-ripened apple, and, like an apple, rosy red. The features were virile and distinctly marked, the eyebrows high and bushy, and beneath them shone a pair of dark eyes, as keen and bright as a hawk's. But for all its sharpness, there was nothing stern or unpleasant about the face. On the contrary, it seemed fairly to teem with good nature and honest shrewdness.

For the rest, the man was dressed in rough tweed clothes and flannel shirt open at the neck, heavy riding boots, and broad felt hat. The horse he rode was a blue roan, rangy, with a look of speed and bottom beyond the ordinary even in a country where good horses were the rule. Such was the outer appearance of David Kent, or, as he was more generally called, "Dad" Kent, the owner of the Bar K.

"What's happened to you, girl?" he asked, after he had cordially greeted Bob and his keen eyes had taken in the dishevelled appearance of them both, speaking in a full, deep voice that seemed to

rumble up from his boots. "You look like you've been roped and drug—the two of you."

"Simply that the spotted bull has nearly killed us both, and that Mr. Lindsay has killed the bull entirely," Betty answered, and then broke into a fluent explanation of their adventure, appealing to her companion at intervals for confirmation.

The ranchman's eyes grew hard as he listened, but he did not interrupt. At the end he smiled suddenly and thrust out a strong hand to Bob.

"You've done well, lad," he said heartily. "If the brute had harmed her I'd never have got over it. I'll not forget—you can rest on that. You killed him with your hands, she says. The neck twist, was it? H'm! It takes skill and courage—that. Ye'll do, lad. Come on now, to the house with you till we have a look to your hurts."

He fell in beside them forthwith, and together they all three rode along the wide lane, bordered with tall cottonwoods, which led to the ranch house. With some assistance, for by this time his injured ankle was much swollen and very stiff, Bob managed to dismount and get inside with the ost's help.

Some time later, after crude but efficient treatment from Kent, who, like most ranchmen, was seldom at fault in an emergency, Bob was helped

into the combination living and dining room, where supper was waiting. It was a large, cheerful room, furnished comfortably, and carpeted with rugs of bear and wolf skins. At one end was a piano, and near it a bookcase filled with works of well-known authors—the former, as Bob rightly guessed, for it had not been there in past days, the property of Betty. Opposite the piano was a great fireplace in which a log fire blazed merrily, for up there in the mountains the evenings were always chilly.

Supper went forward with pleasant informality. When he chose, and he chose now, the owner of the Bar K could be a host of hosts. His big voice and booming laugh filled the raftered room, his ruddy cheeks shone in the mellow lamplight, all aglow with good humour and hospitality. Whether this super-abundance of good spirits was called forth by some secretly imparted hint from Betty, or whether it was merely her uncle's way of showing his joy at her almost miraculous escape from the bull, matters not. It accomplished its purpose, for a while at least. Bob had not been long at table before he forgot the dull ache in his ankle and along with it that deeper, sharper pain, which had tortured his mind for days. Without any really conscious effort he was soon talking and laughing freely.

Later, when the dishes had been cleared away and the fire replenished, and the two men were smoking comfortably, Betty sat down at the piano. She did not do this of her own accord entirely; in fact, it was her uncle who insisted in his booming tones that she should play to them. But she consented willingly, and then, after letting her fingers drift aimlessly along the keys, she suddenly began to sing. Bob had heard good singing before without being especially moved by it; he was no great lover of music under ordinary circumstances; but now—perhaps it was his own mood that gave added meaning to the song, or perhaps in her effort to lift their visitor out of his brooding, the girl surpassed herself—that voice seemed to fill the whole world with melody. It was not a highly cultivated voice, though its owner had some training, and the words of the song itself were commonplace, but there was something greater than words or technique in the lilt of the thing. Up! up! soared her wild, sweet voice, playing on the visitor's tautened nerves until they responded like violin strings to the touch of a master's bow. On went the song with a constant growth of volume: up! up! higher, yet higher, it rose, until the listener's heart seemed to take wing and fly with it into space—ay, to soar into the infinite itself and tremble there. And then it fell, swiftly as falls the wild goose pierced

through by the hunter's bullet, quivered, and was dead.

Bob breathed deeply then and sank back in his chair, feeling strangely bewildered and exhausted in the reaction which now gripped him. He looked up and caught Betty smiling at him over her shoulder. Her uncle chuckled.

"Some singing, eh, lad," he boomed, waving his pipe. "It's not often my song-bird lets herself out, but when she does . . . well, it lifts the heart up out of a man's throat. It's got a 'pull,' that voice of hers."

"I've never heard anything like it," Bob said truthfully; "I've never known what music was until now. This song of yours, Miss Betty, it takes hold."

"It's wonder music."

Betty swung around on her stool and faced them. In the direct rays of the lamp her eyes shone darkly violet. For just a second she caught Bob's gaze and held it. Then she laughed and inclined her head in mock humility.

"'We aim to please,'" she murmured roguishly, and added, as she rose to her feet: "But you praise me too highly. I shall sing no more to-night—I have work to do. You two men must amuse yourselves." And with that she abruptly left the room.

David Kent chuckled, jerked the stem of his pipe in the direction she had gone, and winked knowingly at his guest. This pantomime did not, however, convey much to Bob, who had not yet recovered from the reverie into which the song had plunged him. For a moment both men were silent. Then:—

"Fill up your pipe and make yourself comfortable, lad," the ranchman urged. "The ankle's easier, I hope. You'll need a good rest after the tussle you've had. Thanks be, you were in time. There was never her equal, Bob—never! Quick as a steel trap, and looks to dazzle them all. Work, too! she'll do as much as any man. I'd rather have her by me when I'm moving stock over rough country than three of my men. Not a young buck in the valley but would wade all hell at a nod of her pretty head. But Betty—she treats 'em all alike. It's been like sunrise in the old house ever since she put her little foot across the threshold—ay, that it has."

Bob knocked his pipe out on the hearth and began to fill it afresh. "Somehow I'd never thought of you as a family man, Dad," he observed, reaching for a match.

"No, lad," Kent nodded thoughtfully. "Few have, I reckon. I've been alone these many years. It my Mary had a sister and Betty is her child



When things went smash back there some months ago she came to me. I doubt sometimes that the rough life here is just the thing for her, but she seems happy enough." He fell silent and seemed to reflect for a bit. Finally: "They're so alike," he muttered. "It's like having Mary back again."

## CHAPTER XII

NEXT morning Bob awoke early after a fairly sour sleep, rested, but still very sore and stiff as a result of his encounter with the bull. He got up immediately, however, and dressed himself, and then, with the aid of a stick, limped out on to the veranda for "a breath of the morning," as Regan would have called it.

The dawn presaged the splendour of a perfect day. The view from the veranda was inspiring enough to eclipse, momentarily at least, all gloom of self, and as he inhaled the heady mountain air in huge draughts Bob lost himself in sheer delight. Directly in front of the house was the sharp corrugated slope and truncated peak of a great mountain, flanking the rolling stretches of grassland in the midst of which the ranch was located. Save for grazing cattle and thin banks of drifting mist—the latter fast melting in the path of the rising sun—these slopes were without movement; the chopped off top of the mountain stuck up above the sea of mist like an island floating on clouds. And straight overhead in the full sweep of the sunlight, which had

just topped the eastern range, a pair of great bald eagles soared high in the blue, searching the ground below them with telescopic vision.

The ranch house itself, as has been already touched upon, was more substantially built and considerably larger than most dwellings of its kind and type. Its heavy timbers and neatly finished surface told plainer than words of the sturdy character of its builder and owner, just as the curtains in the windows, and the nicely kept beds of flowers on either side the gravelled path made voiceless advertisement that Betty filled her woman's sphere none the less efficiently because of her ability to outride most men and to sing in such fashion as to exalt her hearers. Behind the house, partially shut from view by an ivy-covered trellis, one glimpsed outbuildings and orchard, the whole somewhat shadowed by the great cliff beyond. A little to the left was an immense alfalfa field, criss-crossed by laterals, and hemmed on its upper side by a wide irrigation ditch that had its origin in the creek some distance above.

For a long time Bob stood and gazed out upon all this natural beauty, drinking in the keen sweet air, soaking up the essence of the dawn, and in his mind—for such was his mood just then—comparing its majesty and breadth with other more cultivated views which he had seen. And doing this, he came

to the conclusion that man's presence in the world can hardly be said to add anything to nature, which "unadorned adorned the most," to say nothing of the sense of peace and well-being which one almost invariably derives from a contemplation of natural beauties. Just here his reflections were interrupted by the appearance of his host.

"Good-morning, Bob," the ranchman cried out heartily. "You're out early, I see. 'Tis a good sign. I was a mite afraid the ankle might put you on your back for a day or two. But this mountain air puts life in a man. Many's the morning have I stood at just this spot and watched the sun spread out atop old Baldy yonder. 'Twas that mountain I glimpsed first from the foot of the valley years ago when I came here as hard-boiled a young hellion as ever forked a horse. And it was the mountain, I know now, that bade me stay and plant the seed for the home I've builded since. 'Tis the hidden, hard-to-come-at places in the world, lad, that show us mortals most of God's handiwork."

The speaker stopped abruptly, and cheery as his tone had been his eyes clouded. Knowing him, Bob guessed that his words had aroused some ever-present memory of the wife who had helped in the building of their home. She slept now out there at the foot of old Baldy in the grave which her mate

had dug with his own hands, and of which for ten years he had made a kind of shrine.

"There's no view like it in all these hills," Bob concurred, after a short pause, "unless it's the one from the ridge there, just as you drop down on the trail. When I rode into the valley yesterday, [ . . . ]" He, too, fell silent suddenly, and looked away.

David Kent's face cleared instantly. He clapped the younger man on the shoulder with a hearty hand.

"Buck up, lad," he said. "'Tis hard at times, I know, but there's nothing like a stiff upper lip and a merry smile to chase the blue devils into their holes. I've been thinking over what you told me last night, and it seems to me that the yarn has its discrepancies. The evidence against you is all circumstantial, for one thing, and many a good man has been blackened by circumstance. We must put our two heads together, lad, and think things out. You're safe here, for the present at any rate."

"Safe!" Bob snorted bitterly, gazing off into space again. "I'm not thinking of personal safety, lad. You know that. God knows, I hope I'm not a coward. I can face the music. And God knows, too, if I *know* that I was either innocent or guilty I'd not be here to-day. As it stands I can

fight back ; I'm—I'm not *sure* of anything. Still, I suppose I did it."

Kent considered for a moment. If he was doubtful or fearful of what might come, he kept his thoughts to himself.

"Why did you do it, then ? " he asked finally.

"He'd insulted me and I hated him. I kept my hands off him at first, but I must have gone back. I woke up there in my own bed. My head was hurt. I'd been in a fight or something. I . . ."

The ranchman shrugged his shoulders. "The can't convict you on such testimony," he declared. "I know something of the law. It was a quarrel at the worst. You struck in self-defence, I mean. You didn't plan it all beforehand ? "

"Of course not. But the rest—I don't remember. We'd quarrelled. Yes. I don't remember fighting or even returning to the ranch at all."

"What do you remember ? "

Bob tried hard to send his thoughts back to that awful night. He went white to the lips with the effort, there were tiny beads of sweat upon his forehead ; but he shook his head helplessly at last.

"I can't," he answered, "I can't do it, Doc. I was riding, seeing things—headless horrors—thought, then, everything went black. I woke up in the sunlight, dizzy, blood everywhere :

head ached like the dickens. I went downstairs. and found him dead. Then Regan came."

"Yes. And good that he did too. You're telling the truth as you see it, lad, but you've got warped somehow. You don't really know what you did."

"But I hated him. We'd quarrelled earlier that very day—scores of times before, for that matter."

"It's a long span between quarrel and murder, Bob. Especially in your case. You'd quarrelled before without trying to kill each other. You were not of yourself that night—true. But why hasten to convict yourself? This last quarrel now, it was worse than most, I take it? I'm not prying into private matters, lad. You know that. You needn't answer if you feel you shouldn't. But . . ."

"I know, I know, Dad. It's your right." The boy's face seemed suddenly to age, he swallowed convulsively. "My God! if you could only know the hell I've lived in. I've told you all of it, all—but—but that. I haven't told *that* to anybody except Tom, and not all to him. But you—you must know—both of you. It's not easy telling. You—you must. . . ."

"Wait a bit." Kent seemed suddenly to think of something. He looked around, then caught Bob by the elbow and started to move toward the grand steps. "Betty's in the back somewhere.

he explained; "she might come any minute. It's near breakfast time. We'll just go where we can talk quiet."

Bob said nothing. Almost like one in a dream he walked, or limped, where the other led him, out of the yard across a strip of meadow towards a clump of pines at the base of the mountain. Here stooping beneath the low branches, they penetrated to the heart of the clump, a kind of natural amphitheatre which had been walled with huge stones and sown with clover and blue grass, so that it sparkled in the morning sunshine like a dewy emerald. Near the centre of the enclosure was a great boulder, bearing an inscription chiselled into its face, and at the foot of this was a thick bed of violets, which, as Bob knew, covered that which the ranchman cared for most in all the world.



## CHAPTER XIII

HERE in the shadow of his wife's tombstone Kent seated himself and drew his companion down beside him.

"We can talk here without fear of interruption, Ed," he said. "Whatever is said here will go no farther. If it's guidance we need—and who does not?—we'll get it here, if anywhere on earth."

Bob nodded absently. It was plain that his surroundings had failed to impress him, that he was too immersed in his own reflections to be cognizant of the compliment the ranchman had paid him in conducting him to this holy of holies; plain too, now that opportunity had come, that he found it hard to tell what he knew that he must tell. He hesitated for a space as if trying to collect his thoughts, then plunged abruptly into his recital, talking hurriedly as men do when they make confession that hurts.

"I'll have to go back a bit," he explained, "so that you'll understand what comes later. The murder is really the least of what I have to talk about—I've told you all I actually know of

that already—it's—it's. . . . Well, to begin with Jackson Lindsay was not my father at all!"

As he voiced this statement, which, not unnaturally, he seemed to expect to startle his companion, Bob paused and looked up quickly. But Kent gave no sign that the words had gone home. If he was surprised, as well he might have been, he did not show it; his expression did not change in the slightest. He waited calmly for the speaker to continue.

"I haven't known it long," Bob added at last when he saw that no comment was coming, "on since just before the murder, in fact, but perhaps I should have guessed at something of the sort. You see—it is more or less common knowledge, I believe—my father (I must still call him that) and I have never been exactly—well, congenial. I think now that in a way he'd always hated me, but I . . . Well, I guess there's no use going into that now."

"At first, during my boyhood, I mean, I saw very little of him. He was, as you know, a man with peculiar habits, and he lived mostly at the ranch, keeping me away at school. Then later I came to live permanently at the Half Moon, and it was then that I began to really know the man whom I always called 'father.'"

In those days, though naturally of a silent and somewhat morose habit, he treated me kindly

ugh, and we got along after a fashion ; at least, did not actually clash ; although I'm afraid I acquired the habit of 'going on my own,' when I needed companionship or advice I went to Tom Regan for it. At first, if, indeed, I noticed it at all, my father ignored this boyish preference of mine. He kept me fairly well supplied with pocket money, which, as a matter of fact, I mostly earned by work on the ranch, and except at meals we often never saw each other for days, and there were intervals when we never saw each other at all. Still, there was at this period no real friction between us ; I was content in a harum-scarum sort of way, and if I did not actually feel a son's affection for the man I lived with I at least respected him enough to avoid conflict with him."

"I know, I understand, lad," the ranchman added. "You needn't try to explain the feeling that was between you. I know you and I knew your dad after a fashion. He was a strange man in many ways, was Jack Lindsay."

Bob nodded. "Yes," he agreed, "he was a strange man, Dad ; but his strangeness never became marked—at least not in my eyes—until after I returned from France a year ago. Until then, as I have said, he'd been silent, morose, somy at times ; but he'd given me a free rein mostly, and I thought we understood each other."

For a long time I'd had practically full charge of the ranch and cattle, and I was happy. Then the war caught us and I was away for two years. When I returned—a good deal of a nervous wreck, I'm afraid—I found everything changed. My father had never been exactly temperate, but now he drank hard, and when he was in liquor he was—a beast! It was then, I think, as I look back upon it now, that I began actually to hate the man—I . . .”

Bob choked and stopped abruptly. For a moment save for a faint rustling of the trees, the glade was silent. Then he went on:

“All this was rotten bad, of course, but at all it might have been worse. It could be borne at least, and I bore it as well as I could. I ignored his sneers and his insults, and I tried to overlook the orgies—‘parties,’ he called them—which were frequently staged at the house. Still, it was natural that we should quarrel at times. I continued, ostensibly at least, to live at the ranch but I kept to myself and away on the range as much as I could. You see, I had no money to speak of, he'd seen to that, and—well, damn it, I was a fool, I suppose. I should have left. But I didn't. I wanted to hide the truth, I wanted to avoid a scandal. I tried to excuse my actions by laying them to drink; and I knew

my own nerves were in rotten shape. Perhaps I was too sensitive—too squeamish. I kept things mostly to myself too. I hardly mentioned what was going on even to Tom.

"But the thing couldn't be kept wholly quiet. My father went out of his way to insult and persecute me. He seemed to take delight in seeing me squirm. Many times when the drink was in him he said things which from any other man would have called for physical retaliation. Still, by swallowing my pride and keeping away from the house as much as possible I managed to avoid open conflict. You see, I knew it couldn't last for ever. I meant to get out some day. I'd saved a little and made an investment in the new oil fields over in the Basin. I meant to pull up stakes for good. But meanwhile I could only wait and hope. That's about how things stood on the night that I—that he was killed."

Pausing again, Bob reached into his pocket for cigarette material, which he slowly twisted into shape, while Kent stared straight before him at the base of the tombstone. For an interval neither man spoke, each seemed buried in his own reflections. Then the boy inhaled a deep puff or two and resumed.

"The rest is soon told," he said, "or, at any rate, such part of it as you've not already heard. It's the part that . . . But I'll stick to my yarn."

Just before dusk that day I rode into the ranch after a trip over to the Basin, where I'd been looking over my oil gamble. It's a pretty long, hard ride you know, by the mountain road, but the news I'd got of my venture had been better than good, and I was consequently more elated than tired. In fact, I'd come home merely to announce my intention of leaving the Half Moon for good within a few days, and to get together some of my personal stuff. The minute I entered the house, however, I got a jolt.

"My father had been drinking heavily. He was drunk. I saw that instantly even before I heard the foul name he hurled at me by way of greeting; but I was too tired and happy just then to talk back. I simply walked by him and went on up to my own room. He followed me. A woman who had been drinking with him remained downstairs. I saw no one else in the house.

" 'You young dog,' he sneered, very drunk, and leaning against the side of the doorway to steady himself. 'You . . . ! Where the hell have you been this past week? Why don't you work for your keep, you . . . '

"He got no farther, Dad. As I've tried to make clear to you, I'd always swallowed or ignored his insults—up to a certain point at least; but I'd warned him long ago to keep his tongue off certain

words, and until that night he had heeded the warning. Drink or the Devil had got him at last, however: he more than just passed the limit. He was just getting started good when I took him by the shoulders. For an instant I shook him as a dog might shake a rat, then I came to myself enough to realise what I was doing—he was no match for me physically, you know, at any time, least of all when the drink was in him—and—well, he was my father. Feeling a bit ashamed of myself, I let him go. But I was still pretty mad.

“ ‘You’d better get out before I hurt you,’ I told him, or words to that effect. ‘Some day I’ll forget myself, forget you’re my father.’ ”

“ He laughed at that. Though this was the first time I’d ever actually laid hands on him he didn’t seem much frightened. He began to sneer at me, rubbing himself where my fingers had cut in.

“ ‘You’re a hell of a fellow, ain’t you?’ he sneered. ‘Beating up an old man who’s been a father to you all your life. A father! Bah! God knows, you need a father, and a mother too. You’re my son, you think. You’re wrong, you young fool! I never had a son. You’re a bastard, that’s what you are. A dirty bastard!’ ”

## CHAPTER XIV

UTTERING the last words in a voice the very sound of which somehow gave the impression that the mere articulation caused him physical as well as mental torture, Bob choked and stared at the ground trembling visibly, as a man trembles who has been through the most violent exertion. He did not look at his companion at all, had not looked at him in fact for several minutes, but had he done so he would have seen a remarkable change in the ranchman's good-natured face. Its ruddy hue had given place to a dull mottled white, the lips had grown hard and thin, and the keen eyes stared straight ahead, unwinking as glass. For a space both men were silent and motionless as the stones around them, then Kent's right hand crept out and fastened on Bob's left.

"You killed him then, lad?" he asked in a hoarse voice. "You killed him then?"

"No." Bob answered without looking up, but his slim brown fingers wound themselves around those rougher, thicker ones. "I didn't kill him, Dad, not then at any rate; I've told you the truth."



but I came near it. He was alive when I left the ranch, alive and laughing at me, although I think he was a little afraid too—sorry almost—at what he'd done. It was the drink in him, I think, that and rage, that made him go farther than he meant. But he told the truth—I read it in his eyes. And he laughed, I tell you. He *laughed*! It's that, Dad, that, that's driving me mad. That that made a wild man of me that night. I'm nothing! I haven't a name even. I . . . Oh, my God! Can't you understand? I . . ."

The ranchman's grip tightened on the boy's fingers. For a little he kept silent. Then:—

"Yes, Bob, I understand," he said slowly. "It does you credit, too, though it near makes me angry to think you should so mistake friendship. Did you think it was your right to the name you wear that has made you welcome here? Does the fact that you've lost that right, or think that you have—for it'll take more than the drunken word of Jack Lindsay to convince me of it—does that fact make you any the less a *man*?"

Bob looked up hesitatingly, not sure, perhaps, that he had heard aright, and the ranchman's face as he saw it now had changed again, changed back to the kindly visage which had greeted him on the veranda an hour ago. For a moment he stared searchingly, then Kent smiled and patted the hand

he held, almost as one might pat the hand of an ailing infant.

"You've been through hell, lad," he said. "You are overwrought. Take a grip on yourself and listen while I tell you what should go far to smother your doubts. The hand of Fate is in this thing, I do believe. Else why should I be the first to hear your story? I knew Jack Lindsay years ago, Bob, when he was a different man than the one you know. His name was not Lindsay then at all: it was Slade—John Slade, or 'Yankee Jack,' as most called him. He carried a black reputation in those days, did Yankee Jack, but he'd tried to live it down, I thought, and . . ."

Startled apparently by the sudden change of expression in his young friend's face, Kent paused, and for a moment the two gazed at each other in silence. Then Bob made a quick motion with his hand, as though brushing something from before his eyes.

"You knew him," he breathed. "You knew him, Dad! Slade, you say?" Then, clutching at the ranchman's arm. "Tell me! tell me!" he exclaimed.

Dad smiled quietly. "I'm just doing that, lad," he went on. "It's not so much I really know, at that, but it should help us to search out the truth. Over in the Colorado mining country, it was, in the

lays when things were a lot rougher than they are now. We were both young then, Jack Slade and I, and our trails crossed a time or two. That was before I came up here and settled down to ranching.

"Yankee Jack had made his pile, I heard later, in a mine upcountry somewhere. Then I lost track of him for a bit, only to meet him again in Moondance just after I located up here. He'd sold out his mining interests, he told me, and drifted across into Wyoming to ranch, much the same as I had myself. He called himself Lindsay then. I didn't ask any questions much. In those days a man's past was his own affair—a good many of us had travelled under more different names than I bothered to talk about. I just took it for granted that Yankee Jack had been an alias that Lindsay wanted to forget, and I let it go at that. You were with him when he showed up in Moondance—tough-headed lad of five or so. That was the first I ever saw of you."

"He—— You never heard anything about our first, then?"

"No. No more than I've said, lad. I wish I might tell you different, but I can't." Kent shook his head and smiled a little sadly at the younger man's suppressed eagerness. "But that don't mean anything," he continued hastily. "As I've

said, it was a big country, and in those days we didn't ask questions. I just gathered, sort of that you were Jack's boy; so did everybody else. He was a close-mouthed man, your father, and he had few friends. He kept his past behind a curtain. But as for—for what you've told me, I don't believe it, son. You're no relation of Jack's, perhaps, that's possible, but you've nothing to be ashamed of. Better forget that part of it and settle down to clearing yourself of this murder business. The truth is bound to come out some day. Just you rest easy about that."

"I wish to heaven I could," Bob muttered bitterly. "I've seemed for days to be living in a constant nightmare. It's bad enough not to know whether I'm guilty of the murder or not. But the other. He didn't lie, I tell you! I'm sure he didn't lie! And anyhow I can prove nothing. It all happened so long ago—I've been with him all my life. There's no proof—no witnesses—nothing!"

"Maybe not, but I wouldn't be too sure, my lad," Kent spoke with an appearance of confidence which, to tell the truth, he was far from feeling. "You've plenty of friends left, and Tom Regan, for one, is a man who has fathomed deeper mysteries. Just keep your courage high and wait a bit. We'll find a way between us."

"Does Tom Regan know all that you've just told me of the past?" Bob asked.

"Not to my knowledge, lad; we've never talked of it. But we'll tell him, of course. Still, it is hardly likely that the past can have anything to do with the present mystery. I'm inclined to think, rather, that Jack Lindsay was killed in a drunken brawl, or maybe the Gray Hoods had a hand in it."

"The Gray Hoods," Bob repeated quickly, looking almost startled for an instant. "Surely, Dad, you don't believe in that nonsense? Why, they say in town that . . ."

"I know, I know," Kent interrupted tolerantly. "Moondance would have it that the Hoods disbanded after the war, and perhaps they did. It's not for me to say. I only know that there's been some queer goings on in the mountains of late. The bootleggers have been getting pretty bold since the lid went on, and I've heard tell that Sheriff Flint is in cahoots with some of 'em. Your father, too, was concerned in the trade, I've heard. Personally I don't hold with Prohibition, but law is law, and Luke Flint has no right to wink at such doings. He's crooked, Flint is; he'll bear watching."

"You don't think that he had anything to do with my—with the murder, do you?"

"No. Can't say as I do, lad. That would be going pretty far. But it might be the finish of some quarrel that we can only guess at right now. Jack Lindsay was a heavy drinker. He got this liquor some place. It may be that the Hoods have been reorganised, and if they have . . . But that's telling. We'd better not cross our bridges before we get to 'em. Give Tom Regan a chance to size things up. He's sharp as an old he-coyote, Tom is. Now, if you're done talking, we'd better go to breakfast, I reckon. I heard the bell some time ago."

After breakfast, as Bob was too lame to go far from the house, Betty suggested that he should help her to place new comb foundations in a number of empty honey frames which she wished to make ready for her beehives, and, accordingly, off they went. The *locus operandi* was in a shaded spot not far from the base of the cliff. Here was a stack of the wooden frames, or "supers," as they are called, and the two were soon busily engaged in attaching the tiny fragments of prepared comb to the narrow slats which formed the tops and bottoms of the supers.

Thus the morning passed pleasantly enough. It was very comfortable there in the shade, and Bob soon came to the conclusion that there were more pleasant tasks than that of invalid assistant to

lovely girl, who made no concealment of the fact that she was interested in her guest. Not that he was in the least forward or inclined to sentimentality—that was not Betty's way at all. It was just that she was easy to look at: a fine type of happy, healthy young woman, sitting there opposite him on an upturned box, her short sleeves giving free play to her pretty arms, and laughing and chatting as her nimble fingers placed at least three "starters" to his more clumsy one. Now, Bob was nothing of a ladies' man, especially in his present frame of mind; but he could not help thinking as he sat there watching her how nice it was going to be to live in the same house with her for a while. Soon his thoughts turned to David Kent, and the aptness of the ranchman's words when he likened the coming of his niece to "sunlight in the house" recurred to him.

"Where is Dad—your uncle?" he asked then.

"Uncle? Oh, he's over at the barns, or out on the range somewhere, I suppose. He's a good deal like these bees of mine—he's never idle. The cattle have begun to drift down from the upper pastures recently, and that keeps him on the go. The beef herd will have to be shipped before long too; the men have already begun to gather, I believe."

"Of course. These hill ranchers must ship

early to avoid snow. It's some time since I assisted at a real old-fashioned round-up." Bob grinned boyishly, pleased at the prospect of action and leaned forward to reach for a fresh supply of the honeycomb.

Betty smiled to herself. She was tickled at the quick recovery her patient seemed to be making not from his physical hurts—for they had been trivial to start with—but from that air of extreme despondency which had weighed upon him when he arrived at the ranch. She felt that her efforts to cheer him up were already bearing fruit; also, perhaps, being a pretty woman, she was not entirely unaware that he enjoyed her company for its own sake.

She looked up suddenly and a quick expression of annoyance flashed into her face. Following her glance, Bob peered through a fringe of trees which partially concealed them and perceived a man mounted on a splendid bay horse, riding slowly in their direction. He was dressed in the nondescript apparel of a working stockman, and even at that distance he somehow gave one the impression of being thoroughly at home.

"Who is it, Miss Betty?" Bob asked quickly.

"It's Bruce," she replied, "Bruce Eaton. He's our range foreman. A good cattle man, uncle says, and all that, but . . ." She bit her lip. Then



added suddenly : " I wonder what he is coming here for ? I thought he was in the mountains with the men. Do you think it best for him to see you here ? He might talk, and . . . "

Bob took the hint at once. For the moment he had almost forgotten that he was, in a way at least, a fugitive, and that he owed it to David Kent, if to no one else, not to advertise unduly his presence at the Bar K. There is a penalty for the harbouring or aiding of men who are " wanted," and though, of course, Bob as yet had no knowledge that he had been formally accused, he knew that he must be at least suspected of being concerned in the murder. Under the circumstances it would be sheer foolhardiness for him to court notice.

" Of course," he nodded, rising to his feet, really very grateful for Betty's tact and quick wit, although it galled him to be forced to hide and for this reason his manner may have seemed just a little strained. " I'd better get out of sight, I expect. I'll step into the shed here "—indicating a small tool-house which stood nearby. " I don't think he's seen us yet." And he suited the action to the word.

On came the horse, and Bob, who could see all that took place through a crack in the wall of his refuge, thought at first that the rider might pass without noticing them at all, but Betty's whit

dress caught his eye, and he pulled up and turned toward her.

"Morning, Miss Betty," he called out. "Where's Dad?"

"I'm sure I don't know," the girl replied somewhat coldly. "He went out as usual after breakfast. You'll find him in the fields somewhere if you'll look, I think."

The foreman nodded, but seemed in no hurry to continue his search. If he noticed Betty's coolness at all he successfully concealed the fact as he dismounted and anchored his horse by the simple process of dropping his reins to the ground. To Bob it appeared that he was pleased at this chance meeting.

"I've rode in to report," he explained casually, removing his big hat and beginning to mop his face and neck with a large handkerchief. "We've found that bunch of T-J yearlin's Dad's been anxious about. By golly, it's sure hot in the sun!"

Betty nodded without looking up from her work, which seemed all at once to require her full attention. Still unabashed by the coolness of his reception, however, the new-comer, having finished operations with the handkerchief, produced the "makings," and sat down on the box which Bob had so recently vacated. Whatever his shortcomings

might be, it was plain that he did not lack in self-assurance.

"*You* look cool enough, Miss Betty," he observed after a moment, manipulating tobacco and paper with practised fingers and eyeing the girl in a way which Bob somehow found unpleasant ; although, of course, the watcher had to admit that the whole affair was none of his business. *He* had no personal interest in the matter. Nevertheless he found this smooth appearing cowman in his chaps and spurs and big black hat a decided nuisance. He was a little consoled, however, when he remembered that look of annoyance which had flashed into Betty's face at sight of the visitor—a look with which her manner now seemed entirely in harmony.

The foreman proceeded to make himself thoroughly at home. In the deliberate manner of a man with plenty of time on his hands he rolled and lighted his cigarette, snapping the burnt match away with a little flourish. Then :—

" Heard the news ? " he inquired casually, and when Betty, still without looking up, shook her head : " Pat Osgood, the game warden, went through camp early to-day. He says old Jack Lindsay of the Half Moon outfit was murdered the other night—him and some woman. All Moon-dance is het up over it, Pat says. Young Bob—Jack's son—is missin', and they seem to think he

did the job. The Sheriff's huntin' him right now. It's the first murder we've had in these parts in many a moon."

"Indeed! How exciting." The girl's self-control, at least in so far as her voice was concerned, was almost uncanny, but her face went white. "They think the young man—the son—did it then? How terrible."

"Sure is." Eaton appeared disappointed at her lack of interest in so sensational a tit-bit. Most women, he thought, would have deluged him with questions. "Can't say I blame him a whole lot—the son, I mean," he went on, after an instant. "Jack Lindsay was a no-account cuss. Still, murder is murder. They'll make quick work of him when they catch him, I reckon."

"The woman, who was she?" Betty asked, looking up for an instant.

"I don't know. Pat didn't say exactly. But they're not accusin' Bob of her death, I understand. It seems she was killed by Lindsay himself. It's a kind of a queer snarl, I take it, all around."

"Oh!" There was an accent of relief in the girl's voice as she bent over her task again, and through his peephole the watcher saw the pink slowly flow back into her cheeks.

For his own part, Bob was so startled by part of what the foreman had said that he could scarcely

contain himself. He had known nothing of a woman being killed. Was it possible that Eaton had been misinformed, or . . . For a little it was all he could do to keep from rushing out of the shed and questioning the man himself. He was prevented from this rashness, however, by the timely arrival of David Kent, and soon afterward the ranch owner and his foreman departed together.

## CHAPTER XV

ABOUT the middle of a sultry afternoon a few days after his interview with Sheriff Flint, Tom Regan sat down to rest upon a fallen tree some two miles as the crow flies—though nearly twice that distance by the route he had been forced to follow—from Half Moon Ranch. All around him was almost virgin wilderness: tall pines, interspersed with thickets of quaking aspens, covered the rocky slopes of the mountains, which viewed from the ranch had seemed so like a huge patchwork of mottled green and brown. Beneath the pines it was very still, stagnant almost; save for the dull roaring of a waterfall a few hundred yards away there was no sound, and as the rumble of traffic in a great city becomes part and parcel of the very atmosphere itself, so did the roaring of waters blend with the mountain silence as to seem an integral part of it. The whole forest appeared lifeless, there was no movement anywhere, not even a squirrel barked its challenge at the visitor as he settled back in a fork of the tree and filled and lighted his battered corn-cob.

Since very early that morning he had been

constantly upon the move, first at the Half Moon, where he had opened the safe and searched its interior, then on the trail of the mysterious horsemen, which had led him from the ranch house across the pastures and up the slope of the foothills into the heavy timber that covered the sides of the mountains. At first, this trail, though practically invisible to ordinary eyes, had been comparatively easy for Regan to follow, but beneath the shadow of the trees, where the ground was carpeted inches deep with firmly packed leaves and needles, the horses had left so little trace of their passing that the tracker had been forced to employ every atom of skill he possessed.

Then, finally, he had entirely lost the trail. Four times, beginning from a point some distance back, where a mis-step had caused one of the horses to slip and make an indisputable mark in the leaves, he had followed the spoor up the slope and around the end of a limestone ridge, and each time he had lost it at the edge of a shale formation that made a barren scar nearly an acre wide in the midst of a tree-clad park. For a long time now he had been halted at this barren spot, unable to discover where the men he trailed had crossed or encircled it. To an inexperienced observer it might have looked as if the two horses and their riders had vanished into the air.

Big Tom, however, was no believer in miracles. His former experience as a peace-officer had taught him to mistrust the obvious; in the past he had followed many a cleverly concealed trail, and he knew, as certainly almost as if he had actually seen them do it, that the men he followed had deliberately chosen to pass over the barren in order to "lose themselves." All that really puzzled him was where and how they had managed to exit without making a trail. They had gone somewhere, of course. Where?

It was more in an attempt to think out an answer to this all-important riddle than because he was tired that Regan had seated himself, and as he smoked, his thoughts as well as his eyes were very busy. Foot by foot, almost inch by inch, he studied the topography of the neighbourhood, and at the same time his methodical mind sifted and catalogued all that he saw. He was mentally eliminating everything that could be of no possible value, retaining for future reference only such features as his experience told him he might eventually wish to use.

Some three hundred yards away and directly in front of where he sat the creek ran swift and strong through a deep rockbound cleft, or gorge. This gorge was nearly a quarter of a mile long and very narrow, being nowhere over thirty feet in width.



but it fanned out abruptly at its lower extremity between sloping banks. At its upper end the gorge was crossed and entirely blocked by a perpendicular cliff of considerable height, and over this the water of the creek fell in an almost solid sheet into the churned-up pool beneath, looking like frothy cream from a short distance away. Completely isolated and rarely visited by man, the spot was known to mountain travellers as the "White Falls."

For a long time Big Tom sat motionless. Save for a thin spiral of bluish smoke from his pipe, he might have been a part of the great bole against which he leaned, so perfectly did his nondescript clothing blend with the rough bark and moss. At last he got up and walked down the hill. His reason told him that there was but one answer to his problem. Since the horsemen had vanished without leaving a trail they must have departed by way of the creek bed, wading or riding in the running water, which would, of course, obliterate all traces of their passage. It was an ancient Indian use that was familiar to all frontiersmen.

And if they had done this in order to reach the creek bed from the barren, there was but one direct route which could be depended upon to show no tracks: a way that wound around the lower end of the gorge and down over a sloping bank of water-channelled stone. Regan followed this path now

and when he reached the bottom of the bank grinned in satisfaction. So far, at least, his reasoning had been correct. He had found his first clue.

Here was a narrow strip of damp, hard-packed sand, and at the edge of this, partly in the water, was the indistinct outline of a human foot. Like Crusoe on his lonely island, though perhaps for vastly different reasons, Regan stared at this certain indication of man's passage. He felt confident now that he would eventually come up with those he followed. True, there was no sign here of the horses he had tracked all day; but this was a minor detail. After all, it was the riders, not their mounts, whom he wanted to find, and it was unlikely that this footprint could have been made by any one else. It was comparatively fresh and in a location which precluded the probability of chance wanderers.

For several minutes Regan studied it, looking from it up and down and across the little stream in the slowly calculating manner of one who figures a problem. At last he shook his head.

"They didn't cross," he decided, "not here, at any rate. They couldn't hardly: that bank yonder's too steep. They waded the crick a-ways—they're did. Up or down? H'm!"

Rubbing his chin, he eyed the rushing water

thoughtfully, noted that it ran about two feet deep over a comparatively smooth, though stony, bottom, and turned back to climb the bank he had just descended. He was too careful a man, too fully aware of the value of making haste slowly, to jump at conclusions and waste priceless time upon a wild goose chase. He meant to be as sure as possible that he was absolutely right in his deductions before he proceeded farther.

He ascended the bank and made his way along the rim of the gorge until he was halted by the sheer wall of the cliff. Here he lay down at full length and peered over at the waterfall and the pool into which it tumbled.

On both sides of the fall, through the ages which had passed since its inception, the rock had become worn and hollowed by the constant action of the water until a basin of possibly a dozen yards in diameter had been formed there. In a measure the walls overhung this basin, so that, looking from above, one derived the impression of gazing down into a great pot or cauldron. And this impression was enhanced by the fact that the basin was filled with drifting clouds of steam-like spray and vapour, which made it impossible to see the bottom clearly.

Still one could see after a fashion, and beyond the whirlpool, almost directly under the fall but a little to one side of it Regan made out that the

creek ran shallow and clear over a smooth stone bottom—evidently a sunken ledge which rimmed the deeper middle basin—and this shallow margin appeared to pass around the opposite corner, or wing, of the waterfall. In other words, as far as could be glimpsed from above, there seemed to be a pathway there by which a man might pass behind the curtain of water, provided—and this Big Tom could not discern from where he lay—that the cliff back of the fall receded somewhat, as is usually the case. In fact, taking the trail he had followed as a premise, it began to look to Regan as if the waterfall might screen the entrance to some subterranean passage, or grotto, into which one might penetrate.

Moving backward from the edge of the gorge to a spot where the roar of the fall became enough subdued by distance to permit of quiet thought, Regan reflected for a little. Like so many men of an active and adventurous habit, he was a firm believer in what he called his "hunches," and he had a hunch now that the men he sought, or clues which would lead straight to them, were to be found behind that wall of water and stone. That they were desperate men he had every reason to believe; he had long since practically made up his mind, regardless of what any one else might think the contrary, that they were responsible for

Lindsay's murder, and he knew that men who have done one murder once will do it again if need be. But it was not fear that made him hesitate now. He wanted merely to be sure of capturing the assassins once he came face to face with them, and the only question in his mind now was this: should he proceed with his investigations single-handed, or should he wait until he had obtained sufficient help to surround the gorge and secure the capture of the guilty men?

He was on the point of deciding in favour of the former alternative, for he was both impatient and fearful of delay now that the solution of the mystery seemed to be almost within his grasp; in fact he was in the very act of turning back toward the creek bed, when something occurred that made him forget everything except what lay before his eyes.

A flash of movement at the farther or opposite side of the barren had warned him of something's approach, and he had just time to drop down behind a convenient boulder, when a man stepped out from the shelter of the trees. Regan almost stopped breathing when he recognised that squat, high-bouldered figure. Until that instant, despite all his efforts to solve the mystery, he had never seriously considered the possibility that Taps, Lindsay's Indian odd-jobs-man, might be directly involved—he had supposed the man to be visiting his own

people on the Reservation—and the contingencies which the Indian's sudden appearance now opened up before him were fairly staggering.

Pausing at the end of the barren, the Indian peered cautiously in all directions, showing plainly that he was wary of observation, an action which alone went far to confirm the watcher's suspicions. For several minutes he hovered in the fringe of trees with all the sneaking stealth of a prowling coyote, but finally, failing to see Regan, and evidently satisfied that he was as much alone as one might naturally expect to be in such a situation, he moved forward again. In the sure, unhurried manner of a man who knew exactly where he was going, albeit Big Tom could not fail to note the continuation of those furtive glances from side to side, he crossed the barren and went down the bank toward the creek, at a point not far from where Regan had discovered the footprint. For an instant his figure stood out clear and distinct upon the brink of the slope, then, as he began to descend, it shortened, all at once it faded completely from the watcher's range of vision.

Regan straightened up and peered over the top of the boulder. At first, when he saw the Indian appear, it had occurred to him as a possible explanation of Taps' presence that he might be following either himself, or the trail of the two horsemen.

ut he had soon dismissed the thought. The Indian's movements since he had come clearly out into the open, though furtive, had been too sure, too confident, for those of a man who followed a new and unknown trail. Whatever his present mission might be, it was obvious that he was upon familiar ground, and it was plain too that his errand was secret.

The instant Taps was out of sight Regan darted to the rim of the gorge and again stretched himself out to peer over and down into the bed of the creek. He could thus see clearly along the stream for some distance, and he had not waited long before the Indian came in view, wading against the knee-deep current, and hugging the opposite bank as closely as possible. Concealing himself as well as he could, Big Tom watched eagerly.

He might, however, have spared himself the pains of being so careful. Taps never once so much as lifted his head to look up. Fully occupied with the not inconsiderable effort of keeping his footing on the slippery stones and at the same time managing his bulky pack which he carried slung on his shoulders, he waded against the current until he had reached a point directly below the base of the fall. Here, enveloped in clouds of spray, he paused for a moment, then he stepped out of sight around the corner of the waterfall. In fact, to Regan, it looked

as if he had plunged directly beneath the water itself.

Taps had hardly disappeared, when Regan sprang to his feet and hurried down the hill to the creek. Whatever his former doubts as to the advisability of exploring the recess behind the waterfall single-handed, he was determined now to follow, to know what lay behind that mass of water and stone. At the edge of the creek he hesitated only long enough to make sure that the revolver he carried in a shoulder holster beneath his coat was ready for instant use before he waded out into the stream and turned up the gorge.

Since he had watched Taps make the ascent, he knew about where to choose his own footing, and in considerably less time than he had anticipated he found himself standing below the waterfall and being soaked with the clouds of spray which rose from it, and the seething cauldron at his feet.

Here, too, in the bottom of the gorge, the roar was deafening. Half blinded by spume, Regan could see none too clearly, but he managed to make out that just ahead and a little to his right in the direction which he knew the Indian had taken a back-eddy caused the water to be comparatively calm, and through the shifting curtain of the fall itself, which here upon its extreme flank was almost



ossamer thin, he thought he could vaguely discern the mouth of a dark opening. With his right hand gripped on the butt of his revolver, for he could only guess what sort of reception he was destined to meet with on the other side of the barrier, Big Tom drew deep breath and stepped forward.

## CHAPTER XVI

CAME a drowning deluge of water, a roar that seemed fairly to burst his ear-drums, and with a gasp Regan dashed the spray from his eyes and looked around to discover that he was standing in a kind of tunnel bored into the living rock, that curved slightly up and back into the bowels of the cliff until its depths were lost in darkness. Behind him, through the shimmering blue-green of the waterfall, the declining sun cast a dim refulgence, and now the roar, which had been so deafening, seemed oddly subdued and far away.

Taps was nowhere in sight. The cavern, or what could be seen of it from the entrance arch, was empty, but Regan had taken only a few steps into the weird twilight when he noticed a kind of dim radiance coming from somewhere ahead, and at almost the same instant he became aware of a low sound, or a series of low sounds, which appeared to come from just beyond what he now discovered to be an abrupt turn in the passage. When he cautiously moved forward and peered around this bend Big Tom started convulsively.

In front of him was a small chamber, which like the outer tunnel had walls and floor of dark-hued stone and only darkness for a roof, but unlike the tunnel this chamber was lighted by the flickering glare from several torches of resinous wood that had been stuck in crevices of the rock. And in the fitful glare thus created Regan saw that which made him catch his breath: the cause undoubtedly of the odd sounds heard before he turned the corner, sounds which even the murmur of the waterfall could not entirely drown.

There was a small fire burning at one side of the cavern, its smoke slowly drifting somewhere into the void above, and not far from this fire a man lay on a rude bed of boughs and blankets. He was asleep, it seemed, for his eyes were closed, but at intervals from his parted lips issued the sounds which had attracted Regan's attention in the first place. Nearer the centre of the chamber another man squatted on his hams, his back toward the visitor, occupied with the fastenings of the pack which he had just dropped from his shoulders. This second man was the Indian, Taps. The first, the man on the bed, whom Regan judged to be sick or injured, for he was evidently delirious and his head was bandaged, was a white man.

Filled with a rushing sense of relief at the apparently successful culmination of his search, for he

felt very sure now of his ability to cope with the situation thus disclosed to him, Regan watched the pair for several minutes without either of them being in any way aware of his proximity. His critical gaze travelled over the sick man from head to foot, noted the dingy bandage around his head, his unwashed, unshaven cheeks, with their stubble of iron-gray beard, and the hollows beneath his closed eyes, plain signs of protracted suffering, then suddenly he started. Something vaguely familiar in the partially hidden features awakened his memory and caused his gaze to pause for an instant before it passed on to take in the various details of the cavern. At last he focused his gaze upon the Indian's bowed back and deliberately cleared his throat with a harsh rasping sound.

At the noise, which must have broken in upon his preoccupation almost like a thunder-clap, Taps sprang upright and whirled around, drawing, as he did so, from somewhere about his person a long bright knife; the whole series of movements from beginning to end being carried out with a speed which would have baffled ordinary eyes. Another man in Regan's shoes could hardly have matched the Indian's quickness, he would almost surely have fallen a victim to that long blade, but Big Tom had been prepared, and his own dexterity of hand and eye was something to marvel at. The knife fell

but the wrist that drove it was halted in mid-air by the darting grip of the big man's fingers. There was a short sharp tussle, a grunt, and the steel tinkled on the stone floor. Then Regan spoke.

"Quit it, you fool!" he snapped. "I don't want to hurt you."

The Indian fell back a little, half-crouching, his teeth bared in an animal-like snarl of rage and fear; for an instant, disarmed though he was, it looked as if he meant to fling himself at Big Tom's throat. Then, recognising the man before him, he seemed suddenly to wilt, to shrink within himself, as it were: his snarl faded, and his gaze darted furtively around the cave. It was plain that he wanted to make a run for it, but Regan's massive figure was planted squarely between himself and the exit. With that quick resignation in the face of insurmountable odds characteristic of his race, he backed farther away and became rigid. Except for the darting glances from his beady eyes, his leathery face was as inscrutable as the wall behind it.

Regan surveyed him grimly for a moment. All in a flash during that brief second or two of conflict he had found the answer to a minor thread of the mystery. He knew now beyond peradventure who the intruder had been who had visited the Half Moon that night and slightly wounded him in the shoulder. But he kept his knowledge to himself.

"Well, Taps," he demanded, "what's doin' here. What you up to, huh?"

The Indian did not answer. He simply glared defiantly, but somehow his face appeared gradually to become a little less inscrutable. His eyes flickered slightly. To Regan it seemed almost as if they showed relief.

"Answer me, you red heathen," the big man's tone was cold and hard. "I aim to know. Savvy? What's happened to him?" He indicated the sick man, who, ceasing to mumble, had not opened his eyes or moved in the least.

"No savvy." Taps found his tongue at last, speaking jerkily in the thick guttural habitual to him. "Him ketchum bad fall. I find um an bring um here. Heap sick. You fix um." And having thus figuratively washed his hands of the whole affair, and true to his phlegmatic character, the Indian squatted down again and resumed his interrupted task.

Regan eyed him for a moment, thinking fast. He knew Indians in general better than most white men, and he knew this Indian in particular better than any other. Consequently he realised at once the futility of trying to force him to talk against his will. It was barely possible, indeed, that in his taciturn way Taps had already told the gist of what he actually knew, he might have no really exact

or intimate knowledge of what had taken place, although this seemed highly improbable; but in any case he could not be hurried. Sceptical as he was, Regan made it appear that he was satisfied, for the moment at least. Curbing his impatience under an exterior as wooden as the Indian's own, he turned his attention to the man on the bed.

When he stooped and looked closely into the face of the unconscious man, which until then he had not clearly seen, he caught his breath in consternation. For a moment he was almost floored by the shock of his discovery. Then with a quick side glance at Taps, who had not seemed to notice anything strange, he went on with his examination. Several minutes later he straightened up and reached for his pipe, which he began to fill mechanically.

"Well, I'll be damned," he muttered. "I'll be tectotally damned!"

## CHAPTER XVII

THE woman looked at Regan defiantly, albeit she wore, too, a blended expression of fright and injured innocence which sat strangely incongruous upon her shrewd and rather faded features; she seemed resentful of the big man's intrusion and at the same time decidedly scared by his presence in her apartment. But true to the type she represented she tried hard to mask her real feelings beneath an appearance of smouldering hostility.

Big Tom, on the other hand, was as serenely calm as if his visit were of a purely social nature. From his manner no one could have guessed that he was seeking for information of the most vital importance, information which he believed this woman to possess, and which he knew that she would withhold from him if she could.

"I've come to talk a little about Kate, Maizie," he began quietly, apparently intent upon the rolling of a cigarette, although his eyes did not miss a single flicker of expression in her face. "You were her best friend. You must know a heap about her relations with Jack Lindsay."



"I'll say so," she replied, and then: "Who doesn't in this town? Jack made no secret of being pretty far gone where Kate was concerned. If it hadn't been for young Bob—the row he'd have raised—the two of 'em might have been married long ago."

"So I've heard." Regan struck a match and lighted his smoke, inhaling deeply for a minute. "That bein' so, it's kind of funny that Jack should kill her, now ain't it?" he went on.

"It might look that way to some. But Jack had the temper of a devil at times, and he was drunk that night, they say. Besides, who knows for sure he did it? Mightn't the murderer—the man who croaked Jack himself—have done the other job?"

"He sure might. But he didn't, Maizie. You know that; so do I. You know there was a reason for what Jack did—a good reason—something a whole lot stronger than just plain whisky madness. There sure was. You see, you heard and saw what happened, Maizie."

As he made this statement in the calm, matter-of-fact tone of one who is positive of his ground, Regan's gaze, which had appeared to wander, settled suddenly upon the woman's face. But if he had expected some startling effect he was disappointed. Maizie continued to return his calm scrutiny without flinching; so far her nerves were well in hand;

but self-control could not entirely prevent a quick blanching of her cheeks or an involuntary tensing of her body, and neither of these indications of inner turmoil were lost upon the visitor. He continued to smoke, eyeing her steadily, waiting for her to speak.

"How—how d'you know that?" she demanded, at last.

Big Tom smiled a little. He knew almost exactly what had been passing in her mind; in fact he was deliberately counting upon this psychological condition to aid him. He knew that he had her uneasy and guessing at the extent of his knowledge, and he had been his experience that once a woman's selfish fears are aroused, she is apt to become garrulous. In his own shrewd way Regan was something of a student of humanity, but his way was not always the way of other men.

"I know a lot I'm not tellin', Maizie," he answered. "Mebbe I was in Jack's confidence, mebbe . . . But we can pass that. You were at the ranch the night. You saw and heard what happened there. Better come clean, Maizie."

"And if I don't?" Maizie still tried to appear defiant, but her eyes now belied her voice and words.

Regan shrugged his shoulders slightly as he dropped his cigarette stub into an ash-tray. "But you will," he returned. "You're no fool. I'm no

accusin' *you* of anything, you know. I don't aim to. But you an' I both know what we do know, my girl. You'd better come clean with me. It'll save time. Of course, if you'd rather tell it to the judge . . ." He paused and looked at her significantly.

The woman appeared to consider. Her self-control had well-nigh vanished. She was all at once palpably nervous. Her hands opened and closed in convulsive jerks and she wet her lips with her tongue. Then :—

"I—you'll—you'll not make me appear in court, Tom. Tell me you won't do that, that you won't let it be known that I was there? If you know so much, you know I'm not guilty of any wrong myself. I would have stopped it if I could. I was only a witness. I . . . My God, Tom Regan! Can't you understand? I'm *scared*!"

"Sure, I know that," he rejoined quietly, "I sure do. But why? You've nothing to fear if you tell the truth. I'll see you through, of course, but as to gettin' you into court, I can't promise. It all depends. But you've no call to be scared—none a-tall."

"You don't know, you don't even guess what I'm up against. You're square. You'd help me—yes. But—but you don't know *him* like I do. If he knew right now that I was there that night he'd

do me in like Jack did Kate. That's why I've kept my mouth shut. Not even you could save me from him. Still, if there's any one he fears at all, it's you, Tom Regan. He's sworn he'll break you. I've heard him myself, and when Jack Lindsay was alive. . . . If he suspects, he'll get us, Tom—both of us."

"Mebbe. But I'm willin' to take a chance myself, Maizie. He'll try, of course, he sure will. But suppose we get him *first*. All I need is a little evidence. Give me that an' I'll put him behind bars, whoever he is. Come now, let's put our cards on the table. You know who killed Jack?"

"No, no," she cried vehemently, leaning forward a little. "No, no, not that, Tom, not that! I can only guess. I didn't see that—he was alive when I left. But I know who killed Kate. It was Jack himself. And I think I know why Bob was framed. God knows how you've learned so much, but you're right. I was at the Half Moon that night. I'd ridden out to get Kate to come back home with me. I knew she was there, and I'd heard . . . But that has nothing to do with the murder. When I got there—it was pretty early yet in the evening—the house was lit up like a church, but nobody around downstairs when . . .  
to the hall.

however, when I heard :

noise and Jack came stumbling down the stairs. My God ! what a sight he was. He'd been drinking hard, he showed that plain, but it was more than booze that made him look so. His face was like a mask—not human hardly. There was blood on it from a deep scratch on one cheek and his open mouth dripped froth, like a mad dog's. He had the Devil in the eyes of him, Tom. The mere sight of him turned me faint, faint and limp as a rag. He didn't see me at first ; he was mumbling and talking to himself.

" 'I've fixed her,' " he muttered, —— her. Tell all she knows, will she, the —— Bleed me dry as a find to keep her dirty mouth shut. She don't know Yankee Jack."

"Then he began to laugh: a mirthless, heartless laugh that made the cold chills run up and down my back. I tell you, he wasn't human. He had poured a glass of whisky from a bottle on the table and was lifting it to his mouth, when he saw me standing there looking at him. The glass crashed on the floor, and for a minute we stared at each other. I think he turned cold sober in that minute. His face went white as chalk.

" 'You, Maizie,' he said finally. 'How'd you get in here?'

"I don't know exactly what I answered him. Nothing maybe for a minute or two. I was scared

about dumb. But then I got Kate's name on somehow, and at that he began to laugh again. That laugh, Tom. My God, it was awful! I had been bad enough at first, but now—now I made me think of devils. He kept it up, too, for a long time. I thought I'd go crazy before he stopped short and began to stare at me again. Finally he said:—

“ ‘You've come to see Kate, have you. Well she's upstairs—what's left of her. The rest is gone—gone to hell, Maizie. I sent her myself, so I ought to know. Better come and have a drink while I tell you about it.’ And with that he reached again for the whisky bottle.

“I ran then, Tom. I was *scared*, I tell you! I thought then, and I think yet, that he'd have killed me if he'd caught me. It was in his eyes. But I got to my horse ahead of him. Then—after I got home, I mean—I decided I'd better keep still about what I knew. I was still scared, you see, scared stiff! And at the time, of course, I didn't know that Jack himself would get his that night. Kate was gone anyhow, and—well, what could I do?”

Regan nodded slowly, when she paused. “I see,” he said. “I'd figured it was about like that. I don't suppose you could do much. Still, I don't see why, after you got safe home and learned the

Jack had been killed, that you didn't say something. He couldn't hurt you."

"That's just the reason—because he was dead," she hit back instantly. "Jack had paid; they all seemed to know, somehow, that he'd killed Kate. My telling what I knew wouldn't do any good, I thought, and there's a good reason why I don't want to be mixed up in this. There's others besides Jack for me to consider—I never had much use for him anyhow."

The woman's mouth closed significantly, and for a moment she and Regan looked at each other in a silence that was eloquent with hidden meaning. In that glance was shrewd intelligence setting itself against a craftiness equally shrewd. Then the visitor cleared his throat.

"I see," he said again dryly.

Maizie bit her lip and changed colour slightly.

"Kate had been trying to blackmail Lindsay, I think," she continued finally. "That's what caused the quarrel, I suppose. Jack was close-mouthed sober, but when he drank he talked and he'd told her things."

Regan nodded. "I figured it might be that way," he admitted. "Kate knew a heap, I reckon. She'd found out Jack's real name, for one thing. They quarrelled, an' he was afraid she'd squeal."

"You've known it, then, all the time," the woman

seemed a bit crestfallen at his anticipation of what she had hoped would be startling news. "It's not much good trying to tell *you* anything," she complained.

Big Tom smiled faintly. "There's one thing you *can* tell me," he remarked. "It's what I want most to find out. Who was at the ranch that night besides you an' Kate, an' why was Bob knocked out an' framed? You know, I reckon?"

"Not me, not for sure I don't," she replied hurriedly, her eyes once more beginning to show that peculiar hunted look. "Jack was afraid of Bob, I think; but I can only guess. I know nothing of the murder, Tom, I swear I don't."

"Mebbe not. But you could guess a heap, I reckon. You sure could. Kate knew Jack's secrets—some of 'em—an' she must have told you a lot. Besides, you admit you are scared of some one. Who is he?"

Thus cornered and put directly to the question, Maizie moistened her lips with her tongue and looked around the room with the hunted, frightened expression of a trapped animal. For a second she seemed on the point of speaking, then changed her mind again and sat down. But Regan was relentless.

"It aint Cock-Eye—Bill Lacy—is it?"



quered, helping her out a little. "You're not afraid of Bill, Maizie?"

"Cock-Eye! That rat!" Her eyes blazed scornfully, so great was the momentary reaction of her relief at this mention of a name which she had no cause to dread. "That sneaking tinhorn. You know better, Tom. It ain't Cock-Eye. But I know nothing, I tell you. I can only guess. I haven't put a name to him. I daren't, I tell you! You know so much, you must know that too. Why mister me this way. You . . . Oh, my God!" She suddenly bowed her face into her hands and burst into tears.

Regan regarded her dispassionately. He knew that she was unstrung, hysterical, beside herself with a fear which had been gnawing at the strings of her being for days, and, though he could be ruthless enough upon occasion, he was not by nature a hard man. In a measure her sudden breaking down was in itself a corroboration of his own suspicions. His discoveries had by now reached the point where he was practically sure of his ground. Still he was a careful man. He wanted to test, to verify, each separate strand of his fabric before he threw his weight upon it, for he knew that he had to deal with an exceedingly clever and slippery criminal.

Rolling himself a fresh cigarette, he puffed at it thoughtfully until the woman ceased her choking

sobs and raised her tear-dimmed eyes to stare at him again. Then :

"Buck up, Maizie," he said kindly. "You need not say it if you don't want to---not now at any rate. You see, I already know a heap. It's just the proof I want-- cold proof. I've gotta have that you know, before I can lay my hand down on the table. A man can't bluff any after he's been called. he sure can't."

"What---what are you going to do?" she asked drying her eyes.

"That's tellin'. I ain't just sure myself yet. It depends some on how the cat jumps. But it'll be a-plenty, I reckon. I aim to see that Bob Lindsay gets justice first of all, then there's other things. You just keep a still tongue in your head, my girl, until you hear from me again." He stood up and put on his hat.

"My God, Tom!" Maizie sprang to her feet and caught at his arm. "You---you're not going to give the show away right now?"

Regan shook his head, smiling faintly at the frankness of her terror. "Sure not. The time ain't quite ripe yet. I've got a little trip into the country to make first. Now you remember--keep what you know to yourself. You'll not lose by it." He turned toward the door, then halted abruptly.

"You never heard of a man named Turlock—Jim Turlock, I don't suppose?" he asked, as if the question had just occurred to him.

She shook her head. Then said quickly: "He's not—not one of the Gray Hoods?"

Regan grinned. "So that's it, eh," he flashed back. "I thought so. Humph! I figured it was the Hoods you feared. Well, it don't matter. So long, Maizie."

She watched him go without another word, standing exactly where he had left her until the echo of his footfalls had died in the distance, then he returned to the chair she had just vacated and sat down. From her manner it was plain that she was thinking fast, weighing the chances of some plan or other, plain too that the fright which she had so recently registered was still strong in her mind, but now this fright seemed of a different kind than formerly. She appeared to be nerving herself up to some desperate course of action. Presently she glanced at the clock, nodded, and sprang to her feet.

Five minutes later, shrouded in a long dark cloak, he left the house and hurried along the silent street.

## CHAPTER XVIII

SHERIFF FLINT wrote laboriously. By habit he was not a writing man, his fingers were clumsy and of their element in the manipulation of a pen but there were times when his business affairs--especially those private affairs which were not part or parcel of his official duties--necessitated a certain amount of clerical work, and there were reasons why he did not care to entrust this work to an amanuensis. He wrote laboriously, painstakingly in a heavy sprawling hand, his whole mind concentrated upon his task.

The hour being late he felt secure from ordinary interruptions, but he had locked himself into his office, nevertheless, and within easy reach on his desk lay the loaded revolver which it was his daily custom to carry thrust within the waistband of his trousers. For Sheriff Flint was not a man who took unnecessary risks. He believed, wherever possible, in working with rather than against odds although he was courageous enough when the pinch came.

The alarm clock on his desk ticked noisily from

eleven to a quarter past. Into the bare untidy office, softened and enriched somewhat now by the shaded light, there penetrated the honking of an automobile horn, then hurrying footsteps on the sidewalk. But with his mind centred upon his work Flint paid no attention. The sound of footsteps ceased, there came a low knock on the office door.

The Sheriff, still heedless of external happenings, continued to write. But the knocking was repeated, and then was repeated again, louder and louder. The midnight visitor, whoever he was, seemed determined to gain admittance.

Flint put down his pen and listened, his face like carved mahogany in the lamplight. Then he swept together the papers upon which he had been at work and placed them carefully away in a drawer of the desk. He got up and deliberately crossed the room to the door, which he unlocked and opened, peering out into the darkened hallway in some annoyance.

"You, Bill!" he growled, when he discovered that his visitor was the cross-eyed gambler. "What you doin' here? I thought you were up in the hills."

"I was until this mornin', Luke," Cock-Eye answered, entering the room. "Shut the door. There's the devil to pay. Regan, he . . ."

'Regan. What's Regan doin' now.' The

Sheriff, having closed and relocked the door swung around to face the caller. "Out with it, you jelly fish!"

"He's wise, that's all." Cock-Eye returned the other man's startled look with a sullen glare. "I told you there'd be trouble if we didn't watch our step. We're into it now—up to our ears."

"The hell we are!" Flint returned to his desk and reseated himself as deliberately as he had risen. It was not his nature to show surprise or trepidation. For a moment he stared in silence at the gambler who in the meantime had taken possession of a convenient chair.

"Well!" he snapped. "Out with it! What's eatin' you, huh?"

Lacy did not reply immediately. He seemed to be collecting himself. It was plain that he had been hurrying; he breathed fast, and his fingers trembled a little as he rolled and lighted a cigarette. Seeing that the tinhorn would speak as soon as he could the Sheriff stifled his impatience and helped himself to a fresh chew, spitting into the sand-box with a little sucking sound.

Cock-Eye recovered his breath and his tongue at practically the same instant.

"I've located Bob Lindsay, Luke," he began. "You're right—he's at the Bar K. Bruce Eaton tipped me off, an' I seen him myself later. If

tried to keep under cover at first, Bruce says, but not for long. I reckon he thinks he's safe enough out there. Dad's niece is livin' with him now, an' she an' Bob are thick as a pair o' rock rattlers. That riles Bruce considerable, he . . ."

"Damn Bruce!" Sheriff Flint interrupted fiercely. "You didn't come clear into town to tell me a love story, did you? Get down to cases, Bill, get down to cases."

"That's what I'm doin'. I've got to begin some place, haven't I?" Cock-Eye retorted belligerently, then, quailing under the other man's stare: "Well, it's like this:

"Yesterday I'm watchin' the Bar K from a quiet spot up in the timber when I see that warhoop choreman of Jack's—Taps, they call him—come ridin' in over the town trail. As it happens, Kent is just startin' out from the ranch an' the two of 'em meet on the road. They talk a bit, an' the Injun hands over a letter, or something like that—I can't tell exactly from where I'm hid—then he turns around an' beats it back into the hills. Dad goes back to the house.

"Well, the thing looks kinda queer to me, so after dark I take a chance an' nose down to the house, where I locate Dad an' the boy sittin' together in the big room. The window's open a little, which makes it easy for me to hear what they say. That

letter the warhoop turned over to Kent is from Tom Regan, Luke. *He knows who killed Jack Lindsay!*"

"Regan!" Sheriff Flint's repetition of the name came like the crack of a pistol, and his long ungainly figure jerked tensely upright. But that was all. He neither moved again nor spoke another word for a full minute. He merely glared: boring the gambler with a look which made him squirm.

"You snake!" he burst out suddenly, leaning forward as if in the act of springing upon his visitor. "You're double-crossin' me. You're keepin' something back. You . . ."

Under the lash of that grating voice and the savage look in the Sheriff's eyes, Lacy paled visibly, albeit he met the other's look with a fair show of steadiness. "You fool!" he hissed. "What do you take me for? D'you think I'd come here like this, to warn you, if I wasn't square? By God, Luke, you'll go too far some day!"

Even in his fury the Sheriff caught the logic of the retort. He pulled himself together hurriedly.

"You're right," he conceded. "There's no sense quarrellin'. Tell me what you know an' be quick about it."

Somewhat mollified by this sudden change of front, Cock-Eye grinned and resumed his narrative.

"I slipped away from the ranch a little later,"



he explained, "and by the time I reached camp I'd decided that I'd better come in an' put you next. So here I am. I rode down as far as Pete Corey's an' got him to bring me the rest of the way in his flivver."

"You didn't get to see exactly what was in that letter?"

"Nope. But I heard enough. There ain't no doubt that Regan's wise himself, but from what I heard I don't think he's told yet who the murderer is. I wish I knew."

"You an' me both, Bill," Flint heartily echoed the sentiment. "For a long time I really figured it was Bob, 'spite of the fact that I knew some of the evidence was framed. But I dunno. I've had my doubts lately."

"You have? Well, I haven't—not till I heard that talk last night. Framin' the evidence didn't cut no ice with me, Luke. That was only helpin' things along a little. But I've always been a mite scared that Regan might turn up something. He's too damn noseey."

"He is that. Curse him! He's out in the hills some place right now, I understand. I figure he smells a mouse, Bill. If what you say is true, he's cleared Bob already, but he ain't been here to notify me as he naturally would have if everythin' was on the level. He knows more'n we thin'

For one thing, I just learned a while ago that he knows Maizie was at the Half Moon that night. He was in to question her. She told me so herself."

"The devil she did. Well, if that's the case we might as well pull up stakes. Me, I'm goin' over into Montana an' stay there. It'll be healthier."

"Mebbe. Still, there's no call to get excited, Bill. We're not beat yet. I had a hunch we'd get in wrong by tryin' to load this thing on to Bob. If I could have got to the ranch before Tom that day I'd have fixed things different. That Indian now—he knows something likely. He may have been around some place that night. By James! I wish I really knew who killed Jack."

"You don't think Bob had any hand in it at all, then?"

"D'you think I'm a fool?" Flint turned his cold eyes on the tinhorn in a way that made him squirm. "To hell with Bob! It's Regan that worries me—Tom Regan an' what he knows. What with the election comin' on an' all that, he'll likely take his chance to throw the iron into me for keeps. He's on his way to the Bar K right now, I expect; I know he's left town. He's found proof that Bob ain't guilty, you say, but he ain't been to me with it, which shows that he don't trust me any. H'm!"

The Sheriff fell abruptly silent, his glassy eyes

fixed in the far-away look of one who thinks hard and fast. For a moment, save for the slow movements of his jaws, he did not stir a muscle. Then he turned to Cock-Eye.

"Did you ever hear of a man named Jim Turlock, Bill?" he asked abruptly.

"Turlock?" Lacy scowled thoughtfully for a instant; then shook his head. "No," he answered. "Why?"

"He seems to be mixed up in this thing somehow. He may be the murderer. I dunno. Regan mentioned the name to Maizie, she says. I never heard of the man myself."

"Turlock." Lacy repeated the name again, still scowling. Suddenly his face brightened. "By golly!" he exclaimed, "I gotcha, Luke. I'd forgot at first, but there's a guy by that name worked for Thad Stevens a few weeks back. It must be the same feller, but I don't see what he could have to do with the killin'?"

"No more do I. Still, you never can tell. Jack was some stepper in his young days—he made enemies. You don't think Regan's told anybody what he knows yet? Good. Figurin' that way, I think we've got a chance. We must use our heads a little, that's all. So long as I can swing the vote in this county I can laugh at Tom Regan. Get me? We ain't personally done anything that anybody

can prove on us now that Jack Lindsay and the woman can't talk."

"No. But the hooch, Luke. If . . ."

"Never you mind that, Bill," Sheriff Flint interrupted and leaned forward impressively. "We'll sidetrack the hooch entire for the present—until things quiet down some, anyhow. When you come in to-night I was writin' a message to the boys about that; you can deliver it yourself now you're here. Tell 'em to bury everything in the old cave an' sit tight for a bit. Get me?"

"Sure. But if Regan knows already, he'll . . ."

"He don't know, Bill. He can't. He's only guessin', I tell you. And anyhow, without the evidence to back it up he dassen't tell what he knows. He'll be glad enough to clear Bob of this murder charge, an' let it go at that. You just go back to the canyon an' do like I say. If you get a chance to arrest that Injun—Taps—do it. I want him. I may be up that way myself in a couple of days."

"All right. I'll start back at daylight," Cock-Eye assented, rolling a fresh cigarette. "But listen here: Suppose I find a way to get Bob. What then, huh?"

"Take it. I've got a warrant for him, haven't I? It ain't our fault if he's innocent—they can prove that later. If we get the boy it'll force Regan

to show his hand an' keep him from snoopin' around too much maybe. But whatever you do, be careful. A mistake right now would ruin the whole works."

"Sure, I know. You can trust me, Luke." Cock-Eye grinned sapiently. "I'll keep an eye on things. What about this man Turlock? Seems to me we oughta find out for sure where he comes in."

"Leave that to me an' the—Hoods," Sheriff Flint smiled back. "I've got a plan, Bill. Damn Turlock. It's Tom Regan I want, and I aim to get him!"

## CHAPTER XIX

OWING to its isolation the Bar K received few visitors, and since the ranch employees were just at this time busy on the range, Bob was not forced into complete seclusion. In fact, he found the condition of semi-hiding in which he was placed far less irksome than he had anticipated ; it would have been decidedly pleasant had it not been for the enforced inaction and a certain feeling of restraint which never left him. After his first visit even the foreman was too busy to come down out of the mountains, or, at any rate, he did not appear at the house and for several days, while his injured ankle grew strong again, the visitor idled in the congenial company of Betty and her uncle, doing what little he could to assist with the lighter tasks around the house and barns. Thus, since Kent spent full half of his time with his men, the two young people were thrown much alone together, and Bob had not been at the Bar K long before he realised that this intimate association was giving rise to thoughts and dreams which never before had occupied his mind.

For Betty was the first girl he had ever known who aroused in him feelings of more than merely ephemeral interest ; and now that he knew that he loved her—for to himself he was soon forced to admit that such was the case—his sensations were an odd composite of joy and pain. Joy because of the great and warming happiness which had come to him out of the mist of horror and doubt in which he had been swallowed up, pain because he could not in justice and decency give expression to the emotions which filled him full. For until he was completely exonerated of all suspicion of murderous guilt, and that other, to himself at least, even darker stain upon him had been removed—never it could be removed—he felt that he could not speak out.

Then, like a flash of the sun through a drift of storm-clouds, had come Regan's note with its assurance that his innocence was already as good as proved, and for a time Bob had been almost happy again, although he was still determined to wait for the proof itself before he spoke. That hideous doubt of his birth kept swimming in his mind, blinding him to all save his memory of what had taken place at the Half Moon on that terrible night.

Hence, since he feared that he might not be able always to restrain himself, and to be constantly with Betty under such circumstances was an

aggravation, he took to wandering and riding much alone through the mountains and canyons which surrounded the ranch. Hour after hour, deep in the soothing solitude of some hidden glen, or high up on the side of some rocky peak, he would sit and brood, striving with all his might to harness and overcome the sea of emotional chaos which engulfed him, and which when at the ranch he tried to bury beneath an exterior of careless camaraderie. In all his introspection he never guessed that Betty might be worrying about him, or that in her eyes he had never been guilty of any crime more heinous than the one of failing to understand her belief in his innocence.

Thus did Betty, wiser far in certain ways, despite her youth, than any man, read pages of what was passing and repassing in his mind. She understood, or thought that she understood—for even her woman's intuition could not penetrate to the root of something of which she did not even guess the existence (she had been told nothing of what had taken place between Bob and his father)—the cause of that look of misery in his eyes on those now all too rare occasions when they were alone together, and she respected him for it. Still, being a woman, she wanted him to speak out, to give her the right to comfort him as she longed to do; but she concealed her desires with all the skill of a born actress.



At times, unable to keep always silent, she bared a portion of her mind to the one person who enjoyed her confidence—her uncle; asking questions and expressing views that would have betrayed her secret to a woman, but which the kindly old ranchman at first found it hard to explain, even to himself.

She was, of course, first of all anxious to learn if her uncle could in any way explain what had actually happened at Half Moon Ranch that night. Why was it that Bob himself could not be sure of what had taken place? Had he been mad, or unconscious, or what?

"Have you ever heard of such a thing before?" she asked.

Kent scratched his ear at this and eyed her in some perplexity. He was doing his best to help. In fact, to give him credit, for he was both shrewd and observant, he had by this time guessed pretty much how the land lay, and he was not at all surprised. To tell the truth, all things considered, he would have been glad, were it not for—and to himself, even after the receipt of Regan's brief note, he was forced to acknowledge this—the possibility that Bob might be unable to completely prove his innocence. For he knew the suffering which such an eventuality would surely bring to his niece. Still he cared for her too deeply to attempt t

influence her overmuch before he had himself considered the problem from all its angles.

"It's hard to say, lass," he replied to her question. "These things are pretty hard to explain. I've never known the like exactly; I can only guess. But I think that Bob, who has suffered in the war, must have been overtaken by a temporary loss of reason. Shell-shock, I've heard, often plays queer tricks with a man's memory, it may even cause a kind of temporary dementia. It may be that Bob went off his head that night, and if so, in a moment of madness, he may have done a terrible thing. Mind you, I say *may*. Personally, I don't believe him guilty. I've known him in a way since he was a little lad, and mad or sane, drunk or sober, that boy is not the kind to murder anybody. But in self-defence, in a fit of passion, perhaps he . . . Bob is high-strung and impetuous. This shell-shock—the doctors say—does queer things. We should prepare ourselves to accept the truth whatever it may be."

"It's too terrible to accept," she replied. "I can't believe it. I won't. I wouldn't believe it if all the world said it were true. Why should he do such an awful thing? His own father! What possible motive could he have?"

"Something that I can't just tell you now, Betty, as between them to make mischief. I've known

men killed for less, and the killer go free and clear. The black mood was upon Bob that night—he told me as much himself. But he said that he left his father alive and well, and I believe him. Still, the question we must face is this: did he go back again? He has no recollection of entering the house, he says,—though he admits riding home in a kind of dream; but he woke up there in his own bed next morning. Now he may have been out of his mind for a bit, and . . .”

“But how could he have been out of his mind?” Betty interrupted. “He’s been sane enough ever since, even though the strain he’s been living under for days has been enough to madden any one. Any child could see that he is suffering agonies over the mere thought that he may be guilty. We know that he is brave. Witness the way he threw himself upon the bull that day. Doesn’t all that prove something?”

The old man nodded thoughtfully.

“It does, of course,” he conceded. “It proves that the lad is at heart no murderer—that he has not the stomach of a killer at all. But we knew that much already, lass. No! no!” He chuckled softly and patted her arm. “We’re just making mountains out of mole-hills by all this talk of ours. Your Aunt Mary had a saying which I’ve lived to learn is mighty true. ‘Worry kills where battle

spare.' Don't you bother your pretty head, my dear. Bob has true metal in him. He'll come clear, I tell you. He's bound to. Hasn't Tom Regan already sent word that he has discovered proof?"

With this assurance, unsatisfactory as it was to her in many ways, Betty was forced to be content for her uncle left her then to take his daily ride through the foothill pastures, and she herself remained indoors for a time. As she moved about the house, humming a little tune beneath her breath, her thoughts veered idly. All at once she paused and her brows puckered in concentration.

"It must be because of that," she was thinking, "that Bob seems to try to avoid me as he does. He knows that I do not believe him guilty of any crime, but he acts at times as if he were almost afraid of me. There's something that I don't quite understand. Of course . . ." She blushed rosily as one logical answer to Bob's mysterious avoidance of her crossed her mind. Was it due after all, to nothing more than his bashfulness? How could she know that the real cause of his "queerness" hinged upon something much more vital than the fear that he was a murderer, or that at almost that very moment the man she loved was a witness to something which would eventually go far toward clearing up the mystery which surrounded him.

## CHAPTER XX

TWO-THIRDS of the way up Baldy, on the opposite side of the mountain from that facing the ranch and several miles away, Bob lay at full length on a sunny ledge which overlooked a tree-filled canyon some hundreds of feet below. It was a favourite resting-place of his, that ledge. Many times in the past few days he had sweated his way up to it—for the only approach was too steep and rough for a horse to travel—and it was here that he spent many hours trying to find surcease of the conflict in his soul. And often in the vast solitude a sense of peace had come to him, so that, even if he had arrived at no definite decision, he had at least felt less unsettled for a time, and it was to gain this temporary relief of mind that he had formed the habit of coming to the ledge.

To-day, however, the solitude which he had learned to look forward to and to accept as an essential part of his present life had been interrupted. An hour or so after his arrival at the ledge, looking down across the depths of the canyon, he had become suddenly aware of movement in a little opening

or park, far to the left, and as he watched it the vague shape which he could at first see through a screen of trees quickly developed into the figure of a mounted man. He was a big man in a dark hat and mounted on a fast-walking, black horse, and he rode slowly toward the upper end of the canyon. At first, concluding hurriedly that the horseman was one of the Bar K riders on the lookout for strays, Bob watched him without especial interest; then something oddly familiar in the man's appearance caught his eye. The distance was still considerable, but the rarefied atmosphere made objects surprisingly clear, and it was not long before the watcher recognised the Bar K foreman—Bruce Eaton.

He rode slowly, almost languidly it seemed to Bob, yet there was something in the way he eyed the trees on either side of him which conveyed the impression that he was alert and watchful. At first, naturally enough, Bob concluded that he was searching the timber for strays, since the canyon was a part of the Bar K range, and it was Eaton's business to keep tab of the cattle, but he had not ched for long before he changed his mind.

"A furtive in the foreman's bearing caused with growing interest until a second and from the cover of the pines and to meet and became engaged

in what seemed to be an earnest conversation. Bob had watched them for a matter of minutes before it dawned upon him that the second rider was none other than Bill Lacy, the cross-eyed gambler with whom he had quarrelled on the night of the murder.

For a little, while this surprising fact soaked into his intelligence, Bob lay still, considering fully and rapidly the possibilities of his discovery. As yet, of course, he knew nothing of Cock-Eye's intimate connection with the mystery, and it did not, therefore, occur to him at once that the tinhorn's presence could have anything to do with himself. Yet his suspicions were aroused. He remembered the furtive manner in which Eaton had surveyed his surroundings, and smiled grimly. The meeting had been prearranged; he was sure of it. But why? What could Lacy and the foreman have in common which had necessitated so long a ride by the former, and this secret rendezvous? The whole affair had a suspicious look.

Bob thought hurriedly. Somehow—he did not know why exactly—perhaps it was for no more tangible reason than that he disliked and distrusted both men—he was convinced that he was on the verge of a discovery. He had already guessed that Bruce Eaton was in love with Betty; he felt that Cock-Eye must be his own sworn enemy; and it suddenly came into his mind that the tinhorn had

been his father's friend. All of which was rather vague and incoherent, perhaps, but anyhow sufficed to stir him tremendously, and almost instantly he determined to find out just what the men were up to.

Still in a prone position, so as to avoid the possibility of being seen from below, he squirmed back from the brink of the ledge and hurried down the place where he had left his horse.



## CHAPTER XXI

TOM REGAN seldom acted hastily. He was not a man of impulse. Things ripened slowly for him as a rule, but once he had made up his mind to move he proceeded straight to his destination. He was not "flashy." He relied upon dogged perseverance and a certain inborn shrewdness, rather than mere brilliance, to achieve his ends; but his confidence in himself was absolute. From the very beginning he had been sure that he would eventually unravel the mystery of Jack Lindsay's death, and he had been patient. But now that he had caught a glimpse of the end he did not hesitate.

When he dismounted from his horse in front of the Bar K ranch house he was surprised and not a little puzzled to find a young and pretty woman watching him across the top of the thick hedge which grew between the garden and the lane. It had been long since he had visited David Kent, and in the interval he had not heard of the coming of his niece. He wondered now just who this slip of a girl could be. Not a servant surely. Even though she was clad in a rather faded gingham dress

her head bound in a gaudy bandanna handkerchief, her hands and lower arms protected by a pair of heavy gloves—the working costume she wore at certain times—Betty looked, in Big Tom's own phraseology, "good enough to eat." From the crown of her dainty head to the tips of her shoes she appeared in her present setting as rare and exotic as an orchid in the midst of a cluster of daisies. The face which met the visitor's frank scrutiny so fearlessly, if a trifle boyish, was so pleasing that he could only wonder at its beauty.

Regan was too old, too experienced, and too confirmed a bachelor to have his head turned by the charms of any woman. Still, he never failed to acknowledge beauty when he saw it. Also it had almost instantly occurred to him that here was a complication which he had not foreseen when he had sent Bob to the Bar K for shelter. And this slip of a girl, cool and self-reliant as she appeared, had no place in his present mission, which was essentially a man's errand.

"A beauty, if God ever made one," he decided. "No he-man of Bob's age could live under the same roof with a picture like that an' not . . ." He smiled suddenly and removed his hat.

"Beg pardon, miss," he said. "I'm lookin' for Dad—Mr. Kent, I mean. He's around some place?" Betty nodded. "He's over at the barn or the corral

I think," she replied. "He rode in not long ago. You're Mr Regan, aren't you?"

"That's me." The visitor grinned. "How'd you know?"

"Oh, we've talked of you a great deal, especially since Bob's arrival; and then, of course, since the Indian brought your note we've been in a way expecting you. Frankly, Mr. Regan, I'm just a tiny bit disappointed in you. Why, you're only a man, after all."

Regan chuckled throatily. He knew now beyond any doubt that his first impression had been correct, he was going to like this girl. He felt, somehow, as if they were old friends.

"Been lyin' about me, have they," he rejoined. "It's like 'em—especially Dad. But I'm afraid I've been neglected, miss; I sure have. It's been a long time since I've heard from the Bar K folk. Dad sure ought to be shook good for not tellin' me when you arrived, an' me a lone man all these years. Just look at all the time I've lost."

"Perhaps; but it hasn't been entirely wasted evidently," she laughed back. "You seem quite capable of making up for it." Then, sobering abruptly: "But you said you wanted to see my uncle. I know it must be important. I mustn't delay you. He . . ."

"Is coming up the lane right now," Regan interrupted, having already spied Kent on his way toward them from the direction of the barn. "I'll toddle along to meet him, I reckon, if you don't mind." And without giving the girl time to make reply he turned away, leading his horse.

To tell the truth, Big Tom just then was in no mood for trifling conversation. All the way from Moondance he had been thinking and planning just what he must do. But first of all he must talk with Bob and David Kent.

When they met in the lane some distance from the house the two men greeted each other as casual as if they had parted only a few hours ago.

"Hullo, Dad!"

"Hullo, Tom!"

Then came a bone-crushing grip of the hand and that was all. Neither man asked a question or volunteered needless information until Regan's horse had been unsaddled and tied in a spare stall to eat his fill of the sweet new hay. But at last—

"Your niece says you got my message all right," the visitor remarked, producing and beginning to fill his blackened corn-cob. "I figured I could trust the Injun that much. He's got a debt to pay."

"So?" Dad's tone was just mildly interrogative, as he settled himself as comfortably as

possible on the tongue of a convenient wagon and reached for his own pipe.

"Yes." Big Tom smiled reflectively and sat down on an upturned box. "He's got himself in wrong a little over this Lindsay business an' he's afraid I'll have him arrested if he don't do as I say," he went on, after he had lighted his pipe.

"Where's Bob?" he asked abruptly.

"I can't say exactly, Tom. Up in the hills somewhere, I reckon. He's taken to wandering off by himself a good bit lately. Inaction hits him pretty hard—that and what's on his mind."

Regan nodded. "He's been through hell, that lad," he remarked. "But I hoped my note would ease his mind a bit. You see, when I sent it I didn't dare to say too much: I lacked full proof of some things, I still do in a way, but the worst is over, Dad. I can prove Bob innocent most any time now, I reckon."

"That's good hearing, Tom," the ranchman said calmly, although his eyes shone. "I thought you'd do that sooner or later. Who is he—the murderer, I mean?"

Regan grinned knowingly. "Mind if I don't tell you his name right now?" he asked. "You see, Dad, it's quite a yarn—how I got on the trail an' all, and I don't want to tell it twice. I'd rather wait till Bob's along. Right now I'd like to ta

about something else. Luke Flint, for one thing."

"Luke Flint, eh!" Kent nodded sagely. "I thought so. I figured he must be mixed up in the thing somehow. He and Jack were friends, I've heard. You know Lindsay called himself Slag years ago, I reckon? It was before your time in this country, but I knew him then. He had pretty shady record."

"Of course; I sure do. I've gone into things pretty deep lately. But I doubt if Flint knows much about that—Jack's past, I mean. Still, it comes from out of that past that this murder comes, as Bob's story begins back there too. He ain't Jack Lindsay's son a-tall, not the same Jack Lindsay we know, that is. You've guessed that, mebbe?"

The ranchman nodded without speaking, and for a moment the two smoked in silence. Then:—

"I've discovered a heap lately," Regan continued. "I've been lucky enough to get on the right track although at the start I never knew where it was goin' to lead me. Luke Flint, an' Jack, an' Bill Lacy, they've all been in together in a bootlegger scheme for a year or two now. Of course, I'd heard rumours before, but I never knew for sure until just recent. Flint, he's the head o' the gang, with Lacy actin' as a kind of go-between. They've made money, I reckon; lots of it. They've got

ig still up this way—over near Dead Horse Canyon, think it is."

"Yes, I know the place," said Dad. "My range-oss, Bruce Eaton, knows it too, better'n he should, aybe; but I haven't asked questions much. ood stock hands are rare these days, and so long s a man does his work I let him alone. Besides, m no revenue agent."

"Neither am I, Dad. I don't hold with Pro-bition a-tall. But this boot-liquor they're peddlin' ow is poison dope, it sure is. However, it's Flint m talkin' about now—not the booze he sells. ein' an officer of the law, he's got less right than, ost to work crooked, but he always was a slippery ss. He's covered himself careful, at that; he re has. Cock-Eye's done most of the real work, reckon, an' if it hadn't been for this murder I ight never have got the dope on 'em. It was e woman, I think—Katie Sturgis—who started all.

"She got wise to something in Jack's past an' ed to hold him up. There was a row, an' he lled her. Then Kate's friend Maizie—Maizie ne, you know, she learns what has happened an' lls Flint. For good reasons of his own Flint on't want to arrest Jack for the murder, he's aid all this boot-leggin' business will get aired court, so he hunts up Cock-Eye an' sends hi





Tom, as you tell it. It is Bill Lacy, then, not Sheriff Flint, who is mainly to blame for the accusation against Bob?"

"Sure. But Cock-Eye's workin' with Flint an' under his orders, Dad. Between the two of 'em hey've done their best to hang Bob, and by golly I aim to break 'em both before I'm done. Luke Flint has held office too long already. He's crooked as a dog's hind leg. As for Cock-Eye: he'll tell all he knows, I reckon, when we corner him. He's that kind."

"But I don't see just how you're planning to do all this, Tom. You say that Flint . . ."

"It's dead easy, I tell you!" Big Tom interrupted, showing his teeth in a wide grin. "I've got 'em in the palm of my hand right now. All I'm waitin' for is to get 'em together so's I can bring my bomb. You wait till we see Bob, an' you hear the rest of what I know. It'll surprise you, Dad. It sure will. I've already been to the lone woman an' filled her full of near-truths that know she'll repeat to Flint. That'll set him to sinkin' an' worryin', an' it's my experience that when men are worried they get careless. I've given ups orders to trail Flint an' Cock-Eye an' report me. The rest is easy, I tell you. It sure is."

## CHAPTER XXII

AFTER Regan had gone, Betty continued to put about amongst her flowers, but now she had an air of abstraction; she moved mechanically. She was thinking of Bob, for she knew that Regan's visit must concern him, and she guessed that the visitor had come to tell her lover of the proofs he had discovered. From this she got to speculating upon Bob's present whereabouts and wondering how soon he would return to the ranch. She knew that he often remained away all day, and she felt that as soon as possible he should be informed of his friend's arrival. As it happened, she had seen him ride off that morning, and from the direction he had taken and her own knowledge of the neighbourhood—though none too accurate—she was fairly sure that she could find him. At any rate, after a brief period of indecision, she determined that she would try, for she wanted mightily to be the first to tell him the good news. Consequently not long after seeing Tom and her uncle had disappeared in the morn, she was riding her pony up the trail to the mountains.

At first the steep ascent forced her to proceed slowly, then came comparatively level ground where she rode faster, then more climbing, and so on. Before she realised it she was several miles from home; then she suddenly awoke to the discovery that she was in a locality which she had never visited before. She must have taken a wrong turn somewhere, she concluded, and she was debating the advisability of turning back at least until she arrived in familiar territory, when she thought that she could smell smoke.

Smoke meant the proximity of a camp fire, and a camp fire indicated the presence of men. Since these men would probably turn out to be some of the Bar K riders, Betty decided to find them and ask her way to the trail which she had missed and which she believed would take her to Bob.

She had topped a short steep slope and was riding along a level winding stretch beneath the whispering silence of the pines, when she received the proof of the camp's existence. A little distance ahead the trail narrowed, passing between the sharp peak of a timbered bank and a high cliff, and here at the edge of the trees a man sat on a horse. When she first glimpsed the man it occurred to the girl, odd as it seemed, that he was waiting for her, and, first too, in a flash, she thrilled to the thought that he was Bob. Then she saw that he was a

o

chance, and a most unprepossessing stranger that.

Slowing her pony down to a walk with a hasty tightening of the reins, Betty thought. The closer she got to him the less she liked the look of the man in front of her. He was rough and old, he carried a gun at his hip, and his face was made repulsive by a horrible squint, gave out the impression that he was looking in three ways at once. Still, he was probably harmless to begin with; this was Bar K range, she told herself; nothing to fear; and since she must either squarely confront and rebuff her steps or keep her head to her pony and went resolutely forward.

The man did not stir. He merely watched steadily as she came toward him; he nodded courteously in response to her curt greeting—stranger, she had just spoken in the mount. In another second Betty would have been by his side, but by that time changed her mind about quailing her way, when suddenly he swung his body round the saddle, and in almost the same instant had shot out and clutched her pony firmly by the bridle.

"Just a minute, miss," he said, "I want to talk."

Betty gasped. She was a high-spirited girl, and whatever her d



but the wrist that drove it was halted in mid-air by the darting grip of the big man's fingers. There was a short sharp tussle, a grunt, and the steel tinkled on the stone floor. Then Regan spoke.

"Quit it, you fool!" he snapped. "I don't want to hurt you."

The Indian fell back a little, half-crouching, his teeth bared in an animal-like snarl of rage and fear; for an instant, disarmed though he was, it looked as if he meant to fling himself at Big Tom's throat. Then, recognising the man before him, he seemed suddenly to wilt, to shrink within himself, as it were: his snarl faded, and his gaze darted furtively around the cave. It was plain that he wanted to make a run for it, but Regan's massive figure was planted squarely between himself and the exit. With that quick resignation in the face of insurmountable odds characteristic of his race, he backed farther away and became rigid. Except for the darting glances from his beady eyes, his leathery face was as inscrutable as the wall behind it.

Regan surveyed him grimly for a moment. All in a flash during that brief second or two of conflict he had found the answer to a minor thread of the mystery. He knew now beyond peradventure who the intruder had been who had visited the Half Moon that night and slightly wounded him in the shoulder. But he kept his knowledge to himself.



or intimate knowledge of what had taken place, although this seemed highly improbable ; but in any case he could not be hurried. Sceptical as he was, Regan made it appear that he was satisfied, for the moment at least. Curbing his impatience under an exterior as wooden as the Indian's own, he turned his attention to the man on the bed.

When he stooped and looked closely into the face of the unconscious man, which until then he had not clearly seen, he caught his breath in consternation. For a moment he was almost floored by the shock of his discovery. Then with a quick side glance at Taps, who had not seemed to notice anything strange, he went on with his examination. Several minutes later he straightened up and reached for his pipe, which he began to fill mechanically.

"Well, I'll be damned," he muttered. "I'll be teetotally damned !"



## CHAPTER XVII

THE woman looked at Regan defiantly, albeit wore, too, a blended expression of fright and injured innocence which sat strangely incongruous upon her shrewd and rather faded features ; she seemed resentful of the big man's intrusion and at the same time decidedly scared by his presence in her apartment. But true to the type she represented she tried hard to mask her real feelings beneath an appearance of smouldering hostility.

Big Tom, on the other hand, was as serene and calm as if his visit were of a purely social nature. From his manner no one could have guessed that he was seeking for information of the most vital importance, information which he believed that woman to possess, and which he knew that she would withhold from him if she could.

"I've come to talk a little about Kate, Maizie," he began quietly, apparently intent upon the roll of a cigarette, although his eyes did not miss a single flicker of expression in her face. "You were her best friend. You must know a heap about her relations with Jack Lindsay."

"I'll say so," she replied, and then: "Who doesn't in this town? Jack made no secret of being pretty far gone where Kate was concerned. If it hadn't been for young Bob—the row he'd have raised—the two of 'em might have been married long ago."

"So I've heard." Regan struck a match and lighted his smoke, inhaling deeply for a minute. "That bein' so, it's kind of funny that Jack should kill her, now ain't it?" he went on.

"It might look that way to some. But Jack had the temper of a devil at times, and he was drunk that night, they say. Besides, who knows for sure he did it? Mightn't the murderer—the man who croaked Jack himself—have done the other job?"

"He sure might. But he didn't, Maizie. You know that; so do I. You know there was a reason for what Jack did—a good reason—something a whole lot stronger than just plain whisky madness. There sure was. You see, you heard and saw what happened, Maizie."

As he made this statement in the calm, matter-of-fact tone of one who is positive of his ground, Regan's gaze, which had appeared to wander, settled suddenly upon the woman's face. But if he had expected some startling effect he was disappointed. Maizie continued to return his calm scrutiny without flinching; so far her nerves were well in hand.

but self-control could not entirely prevent a quivering of her cheeks or an involuntary tensing of her body, and neither of these indications of inner turmoil were lost upon the visitor. He continued to smoke, eyeing her steadily, waiting for her to speak.

"How—how d'you know that?" she demanded at last.

Big Tom smiled a little. He knew almost exactly what had been passing in her mind; in fact he was deliberately counting upon this psychological condition to aid him. He knew that he had her uneasiness and guessing at the extent of his knowledge, and had been his experience that once a woman's self-doubts are aroused, she is apt to become garrulous. In his own shrewd way Regan was something of a student of humanity, but his way was not always the way of other men.

"I know a lot I'm not tellin', Maizie," he answered. "Mebbe I was in Jack's confidence, mebbe . . . But we can pass that. You were at the ranch that night. You saw and heard what happened there. Better come clean, Maizie."

"And if I don't?" Maizie still tried to appear defiant, but her eyes now belied her voice and words.

Regan shrugged his shoulders slightly as he dropped his cigarette stub into an ash-tray. "Be as you will," he returned. "You're no fool. I'm n

accusin' *you* of anything, you know. I don't aim to. But you an' I both know what we do know, my girl. You'd better come clean with me. It'll save time. Of course, if you'd rather tell it to the judge . . .” He paused and looked at her significantly.

The woman appeared to consider. Her self-control had well-nigh vanished. She was all at once palpably nervous. Her hands opened and closed in convulsive jerks and she wet her lips with her tongue. Then :—

“ I—you'll—you'll not make me appear in court, Tom. Tell me you won't do that, that you won't let it be known that I was there ? If you know so much, you know I'm not guilty of any wrong myself. I would have stopped it if I could. I was only a witness. I . . . My God, Tom Regan ! Can't you understand ? I'm *scared* ! ”

“ Sure, I know that,” he rejoined quietly, “ I sure do. But why ? You've nothing to fear if you tell the truth. I'll see you through, of course, but as to gettin' you into court, I can't promise. It all depends. But you've no call to be scared—none a-tall.”

“ You don't know, you don't even guess what I'm up against. You're square. You'd help me—yes. But—but you don't know *him* like I do. If he knew right now that I was there that night he'd

do me in like Jack did Kate. That's why I've kept my mouth shut. Not even you could save me from him. Still, if there's any one he fears at all, it's you, Tom Regan. He's sworn he'll break you, I've heard him myself, and when Jack Lindsay was alive. . . . If he suspects, he'll get us, Tom—both of us."

"Mebbe. But I'm willin' to take a chance myself, Maizie. He'll try, of course, he sure will. But suppose we get him *first*. All I need is a little evidence. Give me that an' I'll put him behind bars, whoever he is. Come now, let's put our cards on the table. You know who killed Jack?"

"No, no," she cried vehemently, leaning forward a little. "No, no, not that, Tom, not that! I can only guess. I didn't see that—he was alive when I left. But I know who killed Kate. It was Jack himself. And I think I know why Bob was framed. God knows how you've learned so much, but you're right. I was at the Half Moon that night. I'd ridden out to get Kate to come back home with me. I knew she was there, and I'd heard . . . But that has nothing to do with the murder. When I got there—it was pretty early yet in the evening—the house was lit up like church, but nobody around downstairs when stepped into the hall.

"I'd just got there, however, when I heard

noise and Jack came stumbling down the stairs. My God! what a sight he was. He'd been drinking hard, he showed that plain, but it was more than booze that made him look so. His face was like a mask—not human hardly. There was blood on it from a deep scratch on one cheek and his open mouth dripped froth, like a mad dog's. He had the Devil in the eyes of him, Tom. The mere sight of him turned me faint, faint and limp as a rag. He didn't see me at first; he was mumbling and talking to himself.

"'I've fixed her,'" he muttered, —— her. Tell all he knows, will she, the —— Bleed me dry as a and to keep her dirty mouth shut. She don't know Yankee Jack.'

"Then he began to laugh: a mirthless, heartless laugh that made the cold chills run up and down my back. I tell you, he wasn't human. He had poured glass of whisky from a bottle on the table and was lifting it to his mouth, when he saw me standing there looking at him. The glass crashed on the floor, and for a minute we stared at each other. I think he turned cold sober in that minute. His face went white as chalk.

"'You, Maizie,' he said finally. 'How'd you get in here?'

"I don't know exactly what I answered him, nothing maybe for a minute or two. I was scare

about dumb. But then I got Kate's name on somehow, and at that he began to laugh again. That laugh, Tom. My God, it was awful! I had been bad enough at first, but now—now it made me think of devils. He kept it up, too, for a long time. I thought I'd go crazy before he stopped short and began to stare at me again. Finally he said:—

“ ‘ You've come to see Kate, have you. Well she's upstairs—what's left of her. The rest is gone—gone to hell, Maizie. I sent her myself, so I ought to know. Better come and have a drink while I tell you about it.’ And with that he reached again for the whisky bottle.

“ I ran then, Tom. I was *scared*, I tell you! I thought then, and I think yet, that he'd have killed me if he'd caught me. It was in his eyes. But I got to my horse ahead of him. Then—after I got home, I mean—I decided I'd better keep still about what I knew. I was still scared, you see, scared stiff! And at the time, of course, I didn't know that Jack himself would get his that night. Kate was gone anyhow, and—well, what could I do? ”

Regan nodded slowly, when she paused. “ See,” he said. “ I'd figured it was about like that. I don't suppose you could do much. Still, I don't see why, after you got safe home and learned the

Jack had been killed, that you didn't say something. He couldn't hurt you."

"That's just the reason—because he was dead," she hit back instantly. "Jack had paid; they all seemed to know, somehow, that he'd killed Kate. My telling what I knew wouldn't do any good, I thought, and there's a good reason why I don't want to be mixed up in this. There's others besides Jack for me to consider—I never had much use for him anyhow."

The woman's mouth closed significantly, and for a moment she and Regan looked at each other in a silence that was eloquent with hidden meaning. In that glance was shrewd intelligence setting itself against a craftiness equally shrewd. Then the visitor cleared his throat.

"I see," he said again dryly.

Maizie bit her lip and changed colour slightly.

"Kate had been trying to blackmail Lindsay, I think," she continued finally. "That's what caused the quarrel, I suppose. Jack was close-mouthed sober, but when he drank he talked and he'd told her things."

Regan nodded. "I figured it might be that way," he admitted. "Kate knew a heap, I reckon. She'd found out Jack's real name, for one thing. They quarrelled, an' he was afraid she'd squeal."

"You've known it, then, all the time," the woman



seemed a bit crestfallen at his anticipation of what she had hoped would be startling news. "It's not much good trying to tell *you* anything," she complained.

Big Tom smiled faintly. "There's one thing you *can* tell me," he remarked. "It's what I want most to find out. Who was at the ranch that night besides you an' Kate, an' why was Bob knocked out an' framed? You know, I reckon?"

"Not me, not for sure I don't," she replied hurriedly, her eyes once more beginning to show that peculiar hunted look. "Jack was afraid o' Bob, I think; but I can only guess. I know nothing of the murder, Tom, I swear I don't."

"Mebbe not. But you could guess a heap, I reckon. You sure could. Kate knew Jack's secret—some of 'em—an' she must have told you a lot. Besides, you admit you are scared of some one. Who is he?"

Thus cornered and put directly to the question Maizie moistened her lips with her tongue and looked around the room with the hunted, frightened expression of a trapped animal. For a second she seemed on the point of speaking, then changed her mind again and sat down. But Regan was relentless.

"It aint Cock-Eye—Bill Lacy—is it?"

quered, helping her out a little. "You're not afraid of Bill, Maizie?"

"Cock-Eye! That rat!" Her eyes blazed scornfully, so great was the momentary reaction of her relief at this mention of a name which she had no cause to dread. "That sneaking tinhorn. You know better, Tom. It ain't Cock-Eye. But I know nothing, I tell you. I can only guess. I daren't put a name to him. I daren't, I tell you! You know so much, you must know that too. Why pester me this way. You . . . Oh, my God!" She suddenly bowed her face into her hands and burst into tears.

Regan regarded her dispassionately. He knew that she was unstrung, hysterical, beside herself with a fear which had been gnawing at the strings of her being for days, and, though he could be ruthless enough upon occasion, he was not by nature a hard man. In a measure her sudden breaking down was in itself a corroboration of his own suspicions. His discoveries had by now reached the point where he was practically sure of his ground. Still he was a careful man. He wanted to test, to verify, each separate strand of his fabric before he threw his weight upon it, for he knew that he had to deal with an exceedingly clever and slippery criminal.

Rolling himself a fresh cigarette, he puffed at it thoughtfully until the woman ceased her choking

sobs and raised her tear-dimmed eyes to stare at him again. Then :

" Buck up, Maizie," he said kindly. " You need not say it if you don't want to—not now at any rate. You see, I already know a heap. It's just the proof I want—cold proof. I've gotta have that you know, before I can lay my hand down on the table. A man can't bluff any after he's been called—he sure can't."

" What—what are you going to do ? " she asked drying her eyes.

" That's tellin'. I ain't just sure myself yet. It depends some on how the cat jumps. But it'll be a-plenty, I reckon. I aim to see that Bob Lindsay gets justice first of all, then there's other things. You just keep a still tongue in your head, my girl, until you hear from me again." He stood up and put on his hat.

" My God, Tom ! " Maizie sprang to her feet and caught at his arm. " You—you're not going to give the show away right now ? "

Regan shook his head, smiling faintly at the frankness of her terror. " Sure not. The time ain't quite ripe yet. I've got a little trip into the country to make first. Now you remember—keep what you know to yourself. You'll not lose by it." He turned toward the door, then halted abruptly.

"You never heard of a man named Turlock—  
im Turlock, I don't suppose?" he asked, as if the  
question had just occurred to him.

She shook her head. Then said quickly: "He's  
not—not one of the Gray Hoods?"

Regan grinned. "So that's it, eh," he flashed  
back. "I thought so. Humph! I figured it was  
he Hoods you feared. Well, it don't matter. So  
ong, Maizie."

She watched him go without another word,  
standing exactly where he had left her until the  
echo of his footfalls had died in the distance, then  
he returned to the chair she had just vacated and  
sat down. From her manner it was plain that she  
was thinking fast, weighing the chances of some plan  
or other, plain too that the fright which she had so  
recently registered was still strong in her mind, but  
now this fright seemed of a different kind than  
formerly. She appeared to be nerving herself up  
for some desperate course of action. Presently she  
glanced at the clock, nodded, and sprang to her  
feet.

Five minutes later, shrouded in a long dark cloak,  
he left the house and hurried along the silent street.

## CHAPTER XVIII

SHERIFF FLINT wrote laboriously. By habit he was not a writing man, his fingers were clumsy and out of their element in the manipulation of a pen but there were times when his business affairs—especially those private affairs which were not part or parcel of his official duties—necessitated a certain amount of clerical work, and there were reasons why he did not care to entrust this work to an amanuensis. He wrote laboriously, painstakingly in a heavy sprawling hand, his whole mind concentrated upon his task.

The hour being late he felt secure from ordinary interruptions, but he had locked himself into his office, nevertheless, and within easy reach on his desk lay the loaded revolver which it was his daily custom to carry thrust within the waistband of his trousers. For Sheriff Flint was not a man who took unnecessary risks. He believed, wherever possible, in working with rather than against odds although he was courageous enough when the pinch came.

The alarm clock on his desk ticked noisily for

eleven to a quarter past. Into the bare untidy office, softened and enriched somewhat now by the shaded light, there penetrated the honking of an automobile horn, then hurrying footsteps on the sidewalk. But with his mind centred upon his work Flint paid no attention. The sound of footsteps ceased, there came a low knock on the office door.

The Sheriff, still heedless of external happenings, continued to write. But the knocking was repeated, and then was repeated again, louder and louder. The midnight visitor, whoever he was, seemed determined to gain admittance.

Flint put down his pen and listened, his face like carved mahogany in the lamplight. Then he swept together the papers upon which he had been at work and placed them carefully away in a drawer of the desk. He got up and deliberately crossed the room to the door, which he unlocked and opened, peering out into the darkened hallway in some annoyance.

"You, Bill!" he growled, when he discovered that his visitor was the cross-eyed gambler. "What you doin' here? I thought you were up in the hills."

"I was until this mornin', Luke," Cock-Eye answered, entering the room. "Shut the door. There's the devil to pay. Regan, he . . ."

"Regan. What's Regan doin' now." The

Sheriff, having closed and relocked the door swung around to face the caller. "Out with it, you jelly fish!"

"He's wise, that's all." Cock-Eye returned the other man's startled look with a sullen glare. "I told you there'd be trouble if we didn't watch our step. We're into it now---up to our ears."

"The hell we are!" Flint returned to his desk and reseated himself as deliberately as he had risen. It was not his nature to show surprise or trepidation. For a moment he stared in silence at the gambler who in the meantime had taken possession of the convenient chair.

"Well!" he snapped. "Out with it! What're you eatin' you, huh?"

Lacy did not reply immediately. He seemed to be collecting himself. It was plain that he had been hurrying; he breathed fast, and his fingers trembled a little as he rolled and lighted a cigarette. Seeing that the tinhorn would speak as soon as he could the Sheriff stifled his impatience and helped himself to a fresh chew, spitting into the sand-box with a little sucking sound.

Cock-Eye recovered his breath and his tongue at practically the same instant.

"I've located Bob Lindsay, Luke," he began. "You're right—he's at the Bar K. Bruce Eaton tipped me off, an' I seen him myself later. He

tried to keep under cover at first, Bruce says, but not for long. I reckon he thinks he's safe enough out there. Dad's niece is livin' with him now, an' she an' Bob are thick as a pair o' rock rattlers. That riles Bruce considerable, he . . ."

"Damn Bruce!" Sheriff Flint interrupted fiercely. "You didn't come clear into town to tell me a love story, did you? Get down to cases, Bill, get down to cases."

"That's what I'm doin'. I've got to begin some place, haven't I?" Cock-Eye retorted belligerently, then, quailing under the other man's stare: "Well, it's like this:

"Yesterday I'm watchin' the Bar K from a quiet spot up in the timber when I see that warhoop choreman of Jack's—Taps, they call him—come ridin' in over the town trail. As it happens, Kent is just startin' out from the ranch an' the two of 'em meet on the road. They talk a bit, an' the Injun hands over a letter, or something like that—I can't tell exactly from where I'm hid—then he turns around an' beats it back into the hills. Dad goes back to the house.

"Well, the thing looks kinda queer to me, so after dark I take a chance an' nosey down to the house, where I locate Dad an' the boy sittin' together in the big room. The window's open a little, which makes it easy for me to hear what they say. That,



letter the warhoop turned over to Kent is from Tom Regan, Luke. *He knows who killed Jac Lindsay!*"

"Regan!" Sheriff Flint's repetition of the name came like the crack of a pistol, and his long ungainly figure jerked tensely upright. But that was all. He neither moved again nor spoke another word for a full minute. He merely glared: boring the gambler with a look which made him squirm.

"You snake!" he burst out suddenly, leaning forward as if in the act of springing upon his visitor. "You're double-crossin' me. You're keepin' some thing back. You . . ."

Under the lash of that grating voice and the savage look in the Sheriff's eyes, Lacy paled visibly, albeit he met the other's look with a fair show of steadiness. "You fool!" he hissed. "What do you take me for? D'you think I'd come here like this to warn you, if I wasn't square? By God, Luke you'll go too far some day!"

Even in his fury the Sheriff caught the logic of the retort. He pulled himself together hurriedly.

"You're right," he conceded. "There's no sense quarrellin'. Tell me what you know an' be quick about it."

Somewhat mollified by this sudden change of front, Cock-Eye grinned and resumed his narrative.

"I slipped away from the ranch a little later,"

he explained, "and by the time I reached camp I'd decided that I'd better come in an' put you next. So here I am. I rode down as far as Pete Corey's an' got him to bring me the rest of the way in his slivver."

"You didn't get to see exactly what was in that letter?"

"Nope. But I heard enough. There ain't no doubt that Regan's wise himself, but from what I heard I don't think he's told yet who the murderer is. I wish I knew."

"You an' me both, Bill," Flint heartily echoed the sentiment. "For a long time I really figured it was Bob, 'spite of the fact that I knew some of the evidence was framed. But I dunno. I've had my doubts lately."

"You have? Well, I haven't—not till I heard that talk last night. Framin' the evidence didn't cut no ice with me, Luke. That was only helpin' things along a little. But I've always been a mite scared that Regan might turn up something. He's too damn nosey."

"He is that. Curse him! He's out in the hills some place right now, I understand. I figure he smells a mouse, Bill. If what you say is true, he's cleared Bob already, but he ain't been here to notify me as he naturally would have if everything was on the level. He knows more'n we think

For one thing, I just learned a while ago that he knows Maizie was at the Half Moon that night. He was in to question her. She told me so herself."

"The devil she did. Well, if that's the case we might as well pull up stakes. Me, I'm goin' over into Montana an' stay there. It'll be healthier."

"Mebbe. Still, there's no call to get excited, Bill. We're not beat yet. I had a hunch we'd get in wrong by tryin' to load this thing on to Bob. If I could have got to the ranch before Tom that day I'd have fixed things different. That Indian now—he knows something likely. He may have been around some place that night. By James! I wish I really knew who killed Jack."

"You don't think Bob had any hand in it at all, then?"

"D'you think I'm a fool?" Flint turned his cold eyes on the tinhorn in a way that made him squirm. "To hell with Bob! It's Regan that worries me—Tom Regan an' what he knows. What with the election comin' on an' all that, he'll likely take his chance to throw the iron into me for keeps. He's on his way to the Bar K right now, I expect; I know he's left town. He's found proof that Bob ain't guilty, you say, but he ain't been to me with it, which shows that he don't trust me any. H'm!"

The Sheriff fell abruptly silent, his glassy eyes

xed in the far-away look of one who thinks hard and fast. For a moment, save for the slow movements of his jaws, he did not stir a muscle. Then he turned to Cock-Eye.

"Did you ever hear of a man named Jim Turlock, Bill?" he asked abruptly.

"Turlock?" Lacy scowled thoughtfully for a moment; then shook his head. "No," he answered. "Why?"

"He seems to be mixed up in this thing somehow. He may be the murderer. I dunno. Regan mentioned the name to Maizie, she says. I never heard of the man myself."

"Turlock." Lacy repeated the name again, still scowling. Suddenly his face brightened. "By golly!" he exclaimed, "I gotcha, Luke. I'd forgot at first, but there's a guy by that name worked for Thad Stevens a few weeks back. It must be the same feller, but I don't see what he could have to do with the killin'?"

"No more do I. Still, you never can tell. Jack was some stepper in his young days—he made enemies. You don't think Regan's told anybody what he knows yet? Good. Figurin' that way, I think we've got a chance. We must use our heads a little, that's all. So long as I can swing the vote in this county I can laugh at Tom Regan. Get me? We ain't personally done anything that anybody

can prove on us now that Jack Lindsay and the woman can't talk."

"No. But the hooch, Luke. If . . ."

"Never you mind that, Bill," Sheriff Flint interrupted and leaned forward impressively. "We'll sidetrack the hooch entire for the present—until things quiet down some, anyhow. When you come in to-night I was writin' a message to the boys about that; you can deliver it yourself now you're here. Tell 'em to bury everything in the old cave an' sit tight for a bit. Get me?"

"Sure. But if Regan knows already, he'll . . ."

"He don't know, Bill. He can't. He's only guessin', I tell you. And anyhow, without the evidence to back it up he dassen't tell what he knows. He'll be glad enough to clear Bob of this murder charge, an' let it go at that. You just go back to the canyon an' do like I say. If you get a chance to arrest that Injun—Taps—do it. I want him. I may be up that way myself in a couple o' days."

"All right. I'll start back at daylight," Cock Eye assented, rolling a fresh cigarette. "But listen here: Suppose I find a way to get Bob. What then, huh?"

"Take it. I've got a warrant for him, haven't I? It ain't our fault if he's innocent—they can prove that later. If we get the boy it'll force Regan

to show his hand an' keep him from snoopin' around too much maybe. But whatever you do, be careful. A mistake right now would ruin the whole works."

"Sure, I know. You can trust me, Luke." Cock-Eye grinned sapiently. "I'll keep an eye on things. What about this man Turlock? Seems to me we oughta find out for sure where he comes in."

"Leave that to me an' the—Hoods," Sheriff Flint smiled back. "I've got a plan, Bill. Damn Turlock. It's Tom Regan I want, and I aim to get him!"

## CHAPTER XIX

OWING to its isolation the Bar K received few visitors, and since the ranch employees were just at this time busy on the range, Bob was not forced into complete seclusion. In fact, he found the condition of semi-hiding in which he was placed far less irksome than he had anticipated ; it would have been decidedly pleasant had it not been for the enforced inaction and a certain feeling of restraint which never left him. After his first visit even the foreman was too busy to come down out of the mountains, or, at any rate, he did not appear at the house and for several days, while his injured ankle grew strong again, the visitor idled in the congenial company of Betty and her uncle, doing what little he could to assist with the lighter tasks around the house and barns. Thus, since Kent spent full half of his time with his men, the two young people were thrown much alone together, and Bob had not been at the Bar K long before he realised that this intimate association was giving rise to thoughts and dreams which never before had occupied his mind.

For Betty was the first girl he had ever known who aroused in him feelings of more than merely ephemeral interest; and now that he knew that he loved her—for to himself he was soon forced to admit that such was the case—his sensations were an odd composite of joy and pain. Joy because of the great and warming happiness which had come to him out of the mist of horror and doubt in which he had been swallowed up, pain because he could not in justice and decency give expression to the emotions which filled him full. For until he was completely exonerated of all suspicion of murderous guilt, and that other, to himself at least, even darker stain upon him had been removed—if ever it could be removed—he felt that he could not speak out.

Then, like a flash of the sun through a drift of storm-clouds, had come Regan's note with its assurance that his innocence was already as good as proved, and for a time Bob had been almost happy again, although he was still determined to wait for the proof itself before he spoke. That hideous doubt of his birth kept swimming in his mind, blinding him to all save his memory of what had taken place at the Half Moon on that terrible night.

Hence, since he feared that he might not be able always to restrain himself, and to be constantly with Betty under such circumstances was an



aggravation, he took to wandering and riding much alone through the mountains and canyons which surrounded the ranch. Hour after hour, deep in the soothing solitude of some hidden glen, or high up on the side of some rocky peak, he would sit and brood, striving with all his might to harness and overcome the sea of emotional chaos which engulfed him, and which when at the ranch he tried to bury beneath an exterior of careless camaraderie. In all his introspection he never guessed that Betty might be worrying about him, or that in her eyes he had never been guilty of any crime more heinous than the one of failing to understand her belief in his innocence.

Thus did Betty, wiser far in certain ways, despite her youth, than any man, read pages of what was passing and repassing in his mind. She understood, or thought that she understood—for even her woman's intuition could not penetrate to the root of something of which she did not even guess the existence (she had been told nothing of what had taken place between Bob and his father)—the cause of that look of misery in his eyes on those now all too rare occasions when they were alone together, and she respected him for it. Still, being a woman, she wanted him to speak out, to give her the right to comfort him as she longed to do; but she concealed her desires with all the skill of a born actress.

At times, unable to keep always silent, she bared a portion of her mind to the one person who enjoyed her confidence—her uncle; asking questions and expressing views that would have betrayed her secret to a woman, but which the kindly old ranchman at first found it hard to explain, even to himself.

She was, of course, first of all anxious to learn if her uncle could in any way explain what had actually happened at Half Moon Ranch that night. Why was it that Bob himself could not be sure of what had taken place? Had he been mad, or unconscious, or what?

"Have you ever heard of such a thing before?" she asked.

Kent scratched his ear at this and eyed her in some perplexity. He was doing his best to help. In fact, to give him credit, for he was both shrewd and observant, he had by this time guessed pretty much how the land lay, and he was not at all surprised. To tell the truth, all things considered, he would have been glad, were it not for—and to himself, even after the receipt of Regan's brief note, he was forced to acknowledge this—the possibility that Bob might be unable to completely prove his innocence. For he knew the suffering which such an eventuality would surely bring to his niece, till he cared for her too deeply to attempt to

influence her overmuch before he had himself considered the problem from all its angles.

"It's hard to say, lass," he replied to her question. "These things are pretty hard to explain. I've never known the like exactly; I can only guess. But I think that Bob, who has suffered in the war must have been overtaken by a temporary loss of reason. Shell-shock, I've heard, often plays queer tricks with a man's memory, it may even cause a kind of temporary dementia. It may be that Bob went off his head that night, and if so, in a moment of madness, he may have done a terrible thing. Mind you, I say *may*. Personally, I don't believe him guilty. I've known him in a way since he was a little lad, and mad or sane, drunk or sober, that boy is not the kind to murder anybody. But in self-defence, in a fit of passion, perhaps he . . . Bob is high-strung and impetuous. This shell-shock—the doctors say—does queer things. We should prepare ourselves to accept the truth whatever it may be."

"It's too terrible to accept," she replied. "I can't believe it. I won't. I wouldn't believe it if all the world said it were true. Why should he do such an awful thing? His own father! What possible motive could he have?"

"Something that I can't just tell you now, Betty, is between them to make mischief. I've known

men killed for less, and the killer go free and clear. The black mood was upon Bob that night—he told me as much himself. But he said that he left his father alive and well, and I believe him. Still, the question we must face is this: did he go back again? He has no recollection of entering the house, he says,—though he admits riding home in a kind of dream; but he woke up there in his own bed next morning. Now he may have been out of his mind for a bit, and . . .”

“But how could he have been out of his mind?” Betty interrupted. “He’s been sane enough ever since, even though the strain he’s been living under for days has been enough to madden any one. Any child could see that he is suffering agonies over the mere thought that he may be guilty. We know that he is brave. Witness the way he threw himself upon the bull that day. Doesn’t all that prove something?”

The old man nodded thoughtfully.

“It does, of course,” he conceded. “It proves that the lad is at heart no murderer—that he has not the stomach of a killer at all. But we knew that much already, lass. No! no!” He chuckled softly and patted her arm. “We’re just making mountains out of mole-hills by all this talk of ours. Your Aunt Mary had a saying which I’ve lived to learn is mighty true. ‘Worry kills where battles



## CHAPTER XX

TWO-THIRDS of the way up Baldy, on the opposite side of the mountain from that facing the ranch and several miles away, Bob lay at full length on a sunny ledge which overlooked a tree-filled canyon some hundreds of feet below. It was a favourite resting-place of his, that ledge. Many times in the past few days he had sweated his way up to it—for the only approach was too steep and rough for a horse to travel—and it was here that he spent many hours trying to find surcease of the conflict in his soul. And often in the vast solitude a sense of peace had come to him, so that, even if he had arrived at no definite decision, he had at least felt less unsettled for a time, and it was to gain this temporary relief of mind that he had formed the habit of coming to the ledge.

To-day, however, the solitude which he had learned to look forward to and to accept as an essential part of his present life had been interrupted. An hour or so after his arrival at the ledge, looking down across the depths of the canyon, he had become suddenly aware of movement in a little opening;

or park, far to the left, and as he watched it the vague shape which he could at first see through the screen of trees quickly developed into the figure of a mounted man. He was a big man in a dark hat and mounted on a fast-walking, black horse and he rode slowly toward the upper end of the canyon. At first, concluding hurriedly that the horseman was one of the Bar K riders on the lookout for strays, Bob watched him without special interest; then something oddly familiar in the man's appearance caught his eye. The distance was still considerable, but the rarefied atmosphere made objects surprisingly clear, and it was not long before the watcher recognised the Bar K foreman—Bruce Eaton.

He rode slowly, almost languidly it seemed to Bob, yet there was something in the way he eyed the trees on either side of him which conveyed the impression that he was alert and watchful. At first, naturally enough, Bob concluded that he was searching the timber for strays, since the canyon was a part of the Bar K range, and it was Eaton's business to keep tab of the cattle, but he had not watched for long before he changed his mind. Something furtive in the foreman's bearing caused him to watch with growing interest until a second horseman appeared from the cover of the pines and rode forward. The two met and became engaged

in what seemed to be an earnest conversation. Bob had watched them for a matter of minutes before it dawned upon him that the second rider was none other than Bill Lacy, the cross-eyed gambler with whom he had quarrelled on the night of the murder.

For a little, while this surprising fact soaked into his intelligence, Bob lay still, considering fully and rapidly the possibilities of his discovery. As yet, of course, he knew nothing of Cock-Eye's intimate connection with the mystery, and it did not, therefore, occur to him at once that the tinhorn's presence could have anything to do with himself. Yet his suspicions were aroused. He remembered the furtive manner in which Eaton had surveyed his surroundings, and smiled grimly. The meeting had been prearranged ; he was sure of it. But why ? What could Lacy and the foreman have in common which had necessitated so long a ride by the former, and this secret rendezvous ? The whole affair had a suspicious look.

Bob thought hurriedly. Somehow—he did not know why exactly—perhaps it was for no more tangible reason than that he disliked and distrusted both men—he was convinced that he was on the verge of a discovery. He had already guessed that Bruce Eaton was in love with Betty ; he felt that Cock-Eye must be his own sworn enemy ; and it suddenly came into his mind that the tinhorn had



been his father's friend. All of which was rather vague and incoherent, perhaps, but anyhow it sufficed to stir him tremendously, and almost instantly he determined to find out just what the two men were up to.

Still in a prone position, so as to avoid the possibility of being seen from below, he squirmed back from the brink of the ledge and hurried down to the place where he had left his horse.

## CHAPTER XXI

TOM REGAN seldom acted hastily. He was not a man of impulse. Things ripened slowly for him as a rule, but once he had made up his mind to move he proceeded straight to his destination. He was not "flashy." He relied upon dogged perseverance and a certain inborn shrewdness, rather than mere brilliance, to achieve his ends; but his confidence in himself was absolute. From the very beginning he had been sure that he would eventually unravel the mystery of Jack Lindsay's death, and he had been patient. But now that he had caught a glimpse of the end he did not hesitate.

When he dismounted from his horse in front of the Bar K ranch house he was surprised and not a little puzzled to find a young and pretty woman watching him across the top of the thick hedge which grew between the garden and the lane. It had been long since he had visited David Kent, and in the interval he had not heard of the coming of his niece. He wondered now just who this slip of a girl could be. Not a servant surely. Even though she was clad in a rather faded gingham dress

her head bound in a gaudy bandanna handkerchief, her hands and lower arms protected by a pair of heavy gloves—the working costume she wore at certain times—Betty looked, in Big Tom's own phraseology, "good enough to eat." From the crown of her dainty head to the tips of her shoes she appeared in her present setting as rare and exotic as an orchid in the midst of a cluster of daisies. The face which met the visitor's frank scrutiny so fearlessly, if a trifle boyish, was so pleasing that he could only wonder at its beauty.

Regan was too old, too experienced, and too confirmed a bachelor to have his head turned by the charms of any woman. Still, he never failed to acknowledge beauty when he saw it. Also it had almost instantly occurred to him that here was a complication which he had not foreseen when he had sent Bob to the Bar K for shelter. And this slip of a girl, cool and self-reliant as she appeared, had no place in his present mission, which was essentially a man's errand.

"A beauty, if God ever made one," he decided. "No he-man of Bob's age could live under the same roof with a picture like that an' not . . ." He smiled suddenly and removed his hat.

"Beg pardon, miss," he said. "I'm lookin' for Dad—Mr. Kent, I mean. He's around some place?" Betty nodded. "He's over at the barn or the corral

think," she replied. "He rode in not long ago. You're Mr Regan, aren't you?"

"That's me." The visitor grinned. "How'd you know?"

"Oh, we've talked of you a great deal, especially since Bob's arrival; and then, of course, since the Indian brought your note we've been in a way expecting you. Frankly, Mr. Regan, I'm just a tiny bit disappointed in you. Why, you're only a man, after all."

Regan chuckled throatily. He knew now beyond any doubt that his first impression had been correct, he was going to like this girl. He felt, somehow, as if they were old friends.

"Been lyin' about me, have they," he rejoined. It's like 'em—especially Dad. But I'm afraid I've been neglected, miss; I sure have. It's been a long time since I've heard from the Barlow folk. Dad sure ought to be shook good for not tellin' me when you arrived, an' me a lone man all these years. Just look at all the time I've lost."

"Perhaps; but it hasn't been entirely wasted evidently," she laughed back. "You seem quite capable of making up for it." Then, sobering abruptly: "But you said you wanted to see my uncle. I know it must be important. I mustn't delay you. He . . ."

"Is coming up the lane right now," Regan interrupted, having already spied Kent on his way toward them from the direction of the barn. "I'll toddle along to meet him, I reckon, if you don't mind." And without giving the girl time to make reply he turned away, leading his horse.

To tell the truth, Big Tom just then was in no mood for trifling conversation. All the way from Moondance he had been thinking and planning just what he must do. But first of all he must talk with Bob and David Kent.

When they met in the lane some distance from the house the two men greeted each other as casually as if they had parted only a few hours ago.

"Hullo, Dad!"

"Hullo, Tom!"

Then came a bone-crushing grip of the hand and that was all. Neither man asked a question or volunteered needless information until Regan's horse had been unsaddled and tied in a spare stable to eat his fill of the sweet new hay. But at last:-

"Your niece says you got my message all right," the visitor remarked, producing and beginning to fill his blackened corn-cob. "I figured I could trust the Injun that much. He's got a debt to pay."

"So?" Dad's tone was just mildly interrogative, as he settled himself as comfortably as

possible on the tongue of a convenient wagon and reached for his own pipe.

"Yes." Big Tom smiled reflectively and sat down on an upturned box. "He's got himself in wrong a little over this Lindsay business an' he's afraid I'll have him arrested if he don't do as I say," he went on, after he had lighted his pipe.

"Where's Bob?" he asked abruptly.

"I can't say exactly, Tom. Up in the hills somewhere, I reckon. He's taken to wandering off by himself a good bit lately. Inaction hits him pretty hard—that and what's on his mind."

Regan nodded. "He's been through hell, that lad," he remarked. "But I hoped my note would ease his mind a bit. You see, when I sent it I didn't dare to say too much: I lacked full proof of some things, I still do in a way, but the worst is over, Dad. I can prove Bob innocent most any time now, I reckon."

"That's good hearing, Tom," the ranchman said calmly, although his eyes shone. "I thought you'd do that sooner or later. Who is he—the murderer, I mean?"

Regan grinned knowingly. "Mind if I don't tell you his name right now?" he asked. "You see, Dad, it's quite a yarn—how I got on the trail in' all, and I don't want to tell it twice. I'd rather wait till Bob's along. Right now I'd like to talk

about something else. Luke Flint, for one thing."

"Luke Flint, eh!" Kent nodded sagely. "I thought so. I figured he must be mixed up in the thing somehow. He and Jack were friends, I've heard. You know Lindsay called himself Slade years ago, I reckon? It was before your time in this country, but I knew him then. He had a pretty shady record."

"Of course; I sure do. I've gone into things pretty deep lately. But I doubt if Flint knows much about that—Jack's past, I mean. Still, it's from out of that past that this murder comes, and Bob's story begins back there too. He ain't Jack Lindsay's son a-tall, not the same Jack Lindsay we know, that is. You've guessed that, nebbe?"

The ranchman nodded without speaking, and for a moment the two smoked in silence. Then:—

"I've discovered a heap lately," Regan continued. "I've been lucky enough to get on the right track although at the start I never knew where it was goin' to lead me. Luke Flint, an' Jack, an' Bill Lacy, they've all been in together in a bootlegging scheme for a year or two now. Of course, I'd hear rumours before, but I never knew for sure until just recent. Flint, he's the head o' the gang, with Lacy actin' as a kind of go-between. They've made money, I reckon: lots of it. They've got

g still up this way—over near Dead Horse Canyon, think it is."

"Yes, I know the place," said Dad. "My range-ss, Bruce Eaton, knows it too, better'n he should, aybe; but I haven't asked questions much. ood stock hands are rare these days, and so long a man does his work I let him alone. Besides, m no revenue agent."

"Neither am I, Dad. I don't hold with Pro-bition a-tall. But this boot-liquor they're peddlin' w is poison dope, it sure is. However, it's Flint m talkin' about now—not the booze he sells. sin' an officer of the law, he's got less right than ost to work crooked, but he always was a slippery ss. He's covered himself careful, at that; he re has. Cock-Eye's done most of the real work, reckon, an' if it hadn't been for this murder I ight never have got the dope on 'em. It was e woman, I think—Katie Sturgis—who started all.

"She got wise to something in Jack's past an' led to hold him up. There was a row, an' he led her. Then Kate's friend Maizie—Maizie ane, you know, she learns what has happened an' lls Flint. For good reasons of his own Flint n't want to arrest Jack for the murder, he's raid all this boot-leggin' business will get aired court, so he hunts up Cock-Eye an' sends him



to the Half Moon to help Jack frame a getaway. At least that's how I size it all up from what I've been able to learn so far, though, of course, I couldn't actually swear that every word is gospel-true."

"Sounds reasonable," Kent conceded. "Go on."

Regan nodded and sucked at his pipe, which had gone out, for an instant.

"The rest is soon told," he said at length, "such part of it, that is, as I'm ready to turn loose right now. The main evidence that concerns Bob I know already, but there's a link or two missin' here. Dad. The way I figure it, however, Cock-Eye is late arrivin' at the ranch---he was sittin' in a poker game at my place that night---an' when he does arrive he finds that it's too late to help Jack any. But he already has reason to hate Bob, so when he finds him hurt an' unconscious in his bed (I'll explain later how Bob came to be thataway) at the two dead folks, he sets to work to frame the murder on him. He does this for two reasons. First, because, as I've told you, he hates the boy; second, because in his hurry he figures that with all the evidence so plain there'll be no investigation to speak of, an' Lindsay's dealin's with Flint an' himself won't be found out. It's just possible he really thinks that Bob is guilty of killin' Jack. You see, it sure looks like it."

"I see," said Kent. "It all sounds very plausible."

Tom, as you tell it. It is Bill Lacy, then, not Sheriff Flint, who is mainly to blame for the accusation against Bob?"

"Sure. But Cock-Eye's workin' with Flint an' under his orders, Dad. Between the two of 'em they've done their best to hang Bob, and by golly I aim to break 'em both before I'm done. Luke Flint has held office too long already. He's crooked as a dog's hind leg. As for Cock-Eye: he'll tell all he knows, I reckon, when we corner him. He's that kind."

"But I don't see just how you're planning to do all this, Tom. You say that Flint . . ."

"It's dead easy, I tell you!" Big Tom interrupted, showing his teeth in a wide grin. "I've got 'em in the palm of my hand right now. All I'm waitin' for is to get 'em together so's I can bring my bomb. You wait till we see Bob, an' you hear the rest of what I know. It'll surprise you, Dad. It sure will. I've already been to the same woman an' filled her full of near-truths that know she'll repeat to Flint. That'll set him to tinkin' an' worryin', an' it's my experience that when men are worried they get careless. I've given 'em orders to trail Flint an' Cock-Eye an' report me. The rest is easy, I tell you. It sure is."

## CHAPTER XXII

AFTER Regan had gone, Betty continued to putter about amongst her flowers, but now she had an air of abstraction ; she moved mechanically. She was thinking of Bob, for she knew that Regan's visit must concern him, and she guessed that the visitor had come to tell her lover of the proofs he had discovered. From this she got to speculating upon Bob's present whereabouts and wondering how soon he would return to the ranch. She knew that he often remained away all day, and she felt that as soon as possible he should be informed of his friend's arrival. As it happened, she had seen him ride off that morning, and from the direction he had taken and her own knowledge of the neighbourhood—though none too accurate—she was fairly sure that she could find him. At any rate, after a brief period of indecision, she determined that she would try, for she wanted mightily to be the first to tell him the good news. Consequently not long after Big Tom and her uncle had disappeared in the barn, she was riding her pony up the trail to the mountains.

At first the steep ascent forced her to proceed slowly, then came comparatively level ground where she rode faster, then more climbing, and so on. Before she realised it she was several miles from home; then she suddenly awoke to the discovery that she was in a locality which she had never visited before. She must have taken a wrong turn somewhere, she concluded, and she was debating the advisability of turning back at least until she arrived in familiar territory, when she thought that she could smell smoke.

Smoke meant the proximity of a camp fire, and a camp fire indicated the presence of men. Since these men would probably turn out to be some of the Bar K. riders, Betty decided to find them and ask her way to the trail which she had missed and which she believed would take her to Bob.

She had topped a short steep slope and was riding along a level winding stretch beneath the whispering silence of the pines, when she received sure proof of the camp's existence. A little distance ahead the trail narrowed, passing between the sharp break of a timbered bank and a high cliff, and here at the edge of the trees a man sat on a horse. When she first glimpsed the man it occurred to the girl, odd as it seemed, that he was waiting for her, and at first too, in a flash, she thrilled to the thought that he was Bob. Then she saw that he was a

stranger, and a most unprepossessing stranger that.

Slowing her pony down to a walk with a involuntary tightening of the reins, Betty tho fast. The closer she got to him the less she the looks of the man in front of her. He was not dressed, he carried a gun at his hip, and his face was made repulsive by a horrible squint gave one the impression that he was looking i directions at once. Still, he was probably harm she told herself; this was Bar K range, she nothing to fear; and since she must either squarely around and retrace her steps or keep she clucked to her pony and went resolutely forw

The man did not stir. He merely watched closely as she came toward him; he nodded c enough in response to her curt greeting—strangers do not pass unspoken in the mount In another second Betty would have been by she had by this time changed her mind about quiring her way, when suddenly he swung his l across the trail, and in almost the same instan hand shot out and clutched her pony firmly b bridle.

"Just a minute, miss," he said, "I want to to you."

Betty gasped. She was a high-spirited girl, had no fear of men, and whatever her doubt

moment before she was sure of herself now. The blood rushed into her cheeks in a quick surge of anger ; all of her former hesitation was forgotten in the face of this coarse familiarity. In a flash it came to her that this must be the man of whom she had heard Bob and her uncle speak—that squint was unmistakable ; and that he must be either drunk or crazy now, she could not tell which.

"Take your hand off that bridle !" she snapped, her eyes blazing. "How dare you !"

Lacy—for it was the cross-eyed gambler sure enough—showed a mouthful of tobacco-stained teeth in what was meant to be a conciliatory grin. "Some high an' mighty, ain't we," he leered, tightening his grip. "Class for a God forsaken place like this, I'll tell the world. But you don't need to feel scared none, sister. I don't aim to hurt *you*. I just wanten . . ."

She jerked her pony's head to one side in a lightning attempt to slip past him ; but he was prepared for some such move and he caught her by the arm. He laughed ; then with a quick wrench pulled the girl around to face him. The next second he gave a howl of pain and all but lost his grip on the bridle. She had slashed him across the cheek with her quirt.

"Damn you !" he rasped, "I'll . . ."

Betty was still trying her hardest to crowd her pony between his larger animal and the cliff. But

the combined weight of the man and his mount was too great. For a moment there was a plunging and straining of bodies, it began to look as if they all might go over the bank together ; Cock-Eye crowded the girl back and sunk his fingers into her soft upper arm so cruelly that she writhed. She was stronger than she looked, however, and, aroused to desperation now, she fought back furiously. His face was scored and bleeding from her finger nails before he succeeded in grasping and holding both her hands.

He was panting for breath, but he laughed exultantly. " You li'l side-winder, you ! " he breathed. " You're some scrapper. But I'll tame you, sister ; you might as well behave. You can't get loose--not a-tall."

Still holding both her hands in one of his he forced them down in front of her and bound them to the saddle-horn with some of the leather tie-strings. Then he swung his horse up alongside, all the time retaining a firm hold on the pony's bridle.

" Now we'll ride on a piece," he said, with a sinister chuckle, " an' if I was you, miss, I wouldn't try no tricks. This here is a risky bit of trail--it's a long ways to the bottom. Come on now, let's 'et a-goin'."

" Where are you taking me ? "

" That's none o' your business. You just do like tell you."

The girl looked at her captor's brutal face and hard, crooked eyes, and obeyed him. For the time being she was subdued, but she was by no means cowed; her brain had never been clearer. Physically she knew that she stood no chance; it was by means of her wits alone that she might hope to ultimately escape. Her friends would find her sooner or later, of course. She was sure of that. But in the meantime . . . Even the reason for her abduction was obscure.

Cock-Eye piloted her through the timber, smiling complacently to himself. If he was drunk, it was not from liquor. He was intoxicated with delight and exultation, albeit a little uneasy too, at this coup he was perpetrating. His meeting with Betty had been entirely accidental. She had, in fact, though she had not guessed it, almost stumbled upon the secret camp and cache of the boot-leggers, and it was as much to prevent the girl's discovery as anything else that Lacy had at first intercepted her.

During their brief struggle, however, he had been struck by an idea which seemed to him to be as clever as it was simple. He was thinking this idea over now as he rode along, and the more he thought the better he liked it. From various conversations with Bruce Eaton, as well as his own spying, he had guessed how the land lay between Betty and Bob



He felt sure that the latter would come where the former led, and if by using the girl as a lure he could entice Bob back into Wyoming he was certain that the game was as good as won.

For Bob Lindsay was still, legally at any rate, a fugitive from justice. The warrant for his arrest had never been recalled, and that warrant read "alive or dead." If Bob were killed while resisting arrest it would not matter much whether he was subsequently found innocent or guilty of the murder. He would be dead, and his killer, acting within the law, would go scot-free. So Cock-Eye reasoned; so his ugly face shone with an ugly glee. He would not, after all, miss the vengeance which all along he had promised himself.

"Turn in behind that stump an' head the hill," he directed, pulling at the pony's head. Then, as they began the descent: "Where's Lindsay?"

"I don't know," flashed Betty; "but he'll be here soon. And when he comes . . ."

She was interrupted by Lacy's hoarse chuckle.

"Yep, 'when he comes,'" he mimicked. "Believe me, sister, he can't come too soon for me. He's wanted for murderin' his daddy, he is. I want to arrest him, by golly!" He chuckled hugely pleased with himself.

Betty said nothing. She was too busy thinking.

to heed much of what he said. She heard, of course, but her mind did not register. She knew that her friends were sure to hunt for her, and it had just flashed into her mind that there would be a fight. This man who held her prisoner was evidently desperate, he must have companions in the place where he was taking her, and if it came to a battle . . . Her cheeks grew white at the picture in her mind and she swayed in her saddle. She must escape somehow before that. But how?

Thus buried in their thoughts, which, though of so different a texture, were sufficiently engrossing to make them both practically oblivious of their surroundings, the two rode on through the timber. And neither noticed the tense face and staring eyes of the man who watched them from behind the bole of a great tree some fifty yards or so away.

## CHAPTER XXIII

THE man was Bob Lindsay. Ever since that moment earlier in the day, when from his post of observation on the ledge he had seen Lacy and Eaton keep their rendezvous, he had been on the trail of one or other of the two men. At first by careful manœuvring and aided by the thick undergrowth he had managed to get near enough to overhear a little of their conversation. Then the pair had separated, and on the spur of the moment chiefly because of what he had just heard, Bob had followed the foreman; but he had lost him later among the trees. Then he had turned back and picked up the gambler's trail. All this had taken time, of course, and as a consequence he had missed being a witness to Betty's encounter with Lacy, but he had overtaken them in time to see her led away.

Bob watched them like a man in a fit. The sight of Betty a prisoner almost floored him. The thing was preposterous. Then came anger, furious anger. For an instant, unarmed as he was, he had been on the point of rushing upon the tinhorn; but he

managed to restrain himself. He knew that he must look ahead before he did anything which might jeopardise either the girl or himself. There must be no mistake. After an instant's hesitation, having arrived at a sort of plan, he hastened through the timber to a point where a steep bank some ten feet high shadowed the trail upon which the two must pass, and which, by reason of a wide bend, it was possible for him to reach some time in advance of the riders. Here he concealed himself again.

He was fairly shaking with excitement. Even his rage at sight of Betty in the custody of a brute like Cock-Eye was somewhat dulled by the possibilities before him. He would rescue Betty presently, of course, that went without saying, but the future which had seemed so black was now a thing to almost glory in. His discoveries of that morning had been an eye-opener. He had heard enough of what had passed between Cock-Eye and the Bar K foreman to convince him that both were members of a gang of boot-leggers of which Sheriff Flint was the actual, though secret, chief, and he had heard, too, his own name mentioned in such terms as to satisfy him that all three men were his sworn enemies.

The knowledge elated him. It showed that conspiracy had been formed against him, that h

was probably the innocent victim of a frame-up as Regan had all along declared, and the thought went to his head like wine. His confidence in himself was returning with almost every breath he drew; he was already become the capable, efficient man of action he had been prior to the shock which had so benumbed his reasoning powers. For if, he told himself, he had through some trick been made to look guilty of a brutal crime, was it not equally possible that that other also was a lie? Thus it was he continued to hide and play the part of a spy, when his heart was singing, and he felt himself equal to almost any odds.

When the two riders came in sight, however, and rode toward him he forgot his personal affairs in a fresh surge of anger. One glance at Betty's white face told him that she at least had already suffered too long. Well, he was ready. Unarmed or not, he felt himself a match for a dozen Lacys. His eyes hard as gray flint, he drew his body into a compact ball and crouched poised in the bushes on the very edge of the bank.

Because the trail was too narrow to permit of two riding abreast Betty came first. Unseeing, grazing straight between her pony's ears, she passed close beneath her lover that he might almost have touched her. Then came Cock-Eye. He, too, up in his own thoughts, which now had little to

do with his prisoner, who was at the most merely a pawn in the game he played, would have passed blindly beneath the hidden man. But Bob chose otherwise. Just as the tinhorn came within reach the man on the bank plunged downward.

A startled grunt and an oath from Cock-Eye almost blended with Betty's suppressed scream—for the girl caught just a glimpse of what had happened before her frightened pony bolted—and torn out of his saddle by the sharp impact of Bob's attack, Lacy fell to the ground beneath his assailant. For a moment it seemed as if both men would surely be kicked or trampled to death by the hoofs of the gambler's plunging horse, but they rolled clear somehow, and in a minute more Bob had twisted the arms of his half-dazed victim behind him and tied them together. Then he possessed himself of Lacy's revolver and stood up just as Betty, who, with her hands loosely bound to her saddle-horn, had been hard put to control her terrified pony, drew rein and faced him.

"You—Bob!" Panting a little from her exertions, her face which had been so white a moment since flushed now a rosy pink, the girl stared incredulously. Then forgetting her bonds in her eagerness to dismount she all but fell headlong from her saddle. He sprang forward and caught her, however, and loosened her hands, and then

a brief, sweet interval they remained so, forgetful of all else save the love which neither now made any effort to repress. It was enough for them that they were there together; nothing but that could ever really matter any more. Then Bob placed her on her feet.

"Thank God, you're all right," he breathed. "I don't understand how you happen to be here at all—but that can wait. We must get back to the ranch. First . . ."

He turned to Cock-Eye, who was beginning to regain his wind, and shook him roughly.

"Come to life," he ordered, "and be quick about it. You're going to talk. Understand? Talk fast."

"You go to hell!" Lacy, as yet too dazed by his fall and the sudden way in which the tables had been turned upon him to fully realise his predicament, attempted to bluff. "Turn me loose, or . . ."

"I'll turn you loose all right." Cold rage and deadly intensity of purpose made Bob's voice almost unrecognisable, and a smear of earth mingled with blood with a small scratch on his cheek gave his face a ferocious expression. It was plain that he was roused to tremendous fury.

"I'll turn you loose," he repeated, "but it'll be in the next world and with a bullet if you don't

“speak up.” He cocked the captured pistol and shoved its muzzle within an inch of his prisoner’s nose. “Now then,” he grated, “get busy! Why did you dare to lay your dirty paws on Miss Wilson?”

Cock-Eye flinched. To give him credit, he was not altogether a coward, but the look in the face of his captor just then might have daunted a far braver man. Besides, the question happened to be one to which a true answer could do the prisoner no harm. If he talked he would gain time, at any rate.

“I knew you an’ the girl was sweet on each other,” he explained, essaying a conciliatory grin. “I aimed to get you to follow her acrost the line so’s we could arrest you legal. She wouldn’t have been hurt none.”

“Flint put you up to it, then?”

The prisoner achieved something that might have been construed into a nod, although as a matter of strict veracity the idea was his own.

“Who told you about—that I was here at the bar K?”

“Nobody. I seen you myself from up in the hills.”

“You lie! It was Eaton. You met him to-day appointment and you’ve met him several time



before. I've been watching you. You'd better tell me the truth if you want to save your cowardly hide, you hound. Now, out with it! Who killed my . . . Who killed Jackson Lindsay? "

Cock-Eye's ugly face twisted in an expression of mingled fright and consternation which under less serious circumstances would have been ludicrous. He was so staggered at this realisation that his carefully guarded meetings with the foreman were known that it is doubtful if at first he comprehended the question at all. For a full minute he simply stared, and Bob was forced to repeat himself twice before he could get an answer.

"I don't know," the gambler replied sullenly, at last. "I thought it was you. So help me God I did!" This last hastily at the look which had flashed into Bob's eyes. "You was there on the bed when I got to the ranch—knocked out stiff you was. I—I figured there'd been a scrap and that you'd croaked Jack. Me, I never done a thing but shift the evidence a little to make it blacker for you. I'll admit I lied when I said I seen you ridin' away from the ranch that mornin'."

"You did, eh. Why?" Bob spoke quietly although the prisoner's frank admissions made him

boil. His recent suffering was by no means forgotten, and the knowledge that it had been largely due to the cowardly scheming of this cross-eyed blackguard made him feel like attacking the man with a club. Still, he controlled himself, as Lacy replied :—

“ Because you showed me up at Regan’s. I aimed to get even.”

“ You’re sure that’s the only reason. Sheriff Flint didn’t want me put out of the way, for instance? Weren’t you afraid I might give evidence against you in this moonshine business? ”

“ Some. But that was later. At that, we figured Jack hadn’t told you nothin’ much. As for Flint, he . . .” Cock-Eye paused significantly. For an instant he seemed on the point of revealing something; then abruptly his face turned sullen again. “ Flint only sent me out to the Half Moon to investigate a report he’d got,” he wound up. “ That’s all I can tell you.”

“ We’ll see about that. We’re going to the Bar K now. You’re going to behave. One crooked move and I’ll shoot.”

At the ranch some time later Regan and Kent, who had meanwhile been too busy with their own affairs to become uneasy at Betty’s absence, listened with interest to the story of the attempted abduction and Lacy’s partial confession.

"That's fine," the former commented, "it sure is. By golly, the whole thing's workin' out plain as plain. I've known for quite a spell that Luke Flint was boot-leggin', but he's been so darn cute about it that nobody could get anything on him. But we've got him now, folks; we sure have. There's a big surprise comin' to more'n a few before this deal's played out." He chuckled knowingly.

"Surprise!" Bob shot a quick glance at his friend. "You've got something up your sleeve, Tom; I know you. You're going to say that you've found the murderer, I suppose. I gathered from your note that . . ."

"That you're innocent, an' as clean of trouble as a hound's tooth, son. You betcha! That's what I aimed for you to gather, though I didn't write much for fear the message might fall into wrong hands," Regan interrupted. "But that ain't what'll surprise Flint so much," he went on. "He knew that from the first, I reckon, just like I did. The evidence was too plain to be true. Yes, I sure know who the murderer is, all right."

"You do! Who is he? Not—not Cock-Eye, or Flint himself?"

"Nope. Not nary one o' them, Bob," Regan med. "He's a man you'd never have suspected all. But you know him—you sure do. I got

his full confession. You're cleared, boy, cleared of *everything*. Understand? I've got a whole lot to tell you, but there's no use hurryin' things. It's a mighty strange yarn, at that, mighty strange! It goes back twenty years or more, for one thing, an' . . . But here she is."

## CHAPTER XXIV

ONE day in the 90's, near the beginning of the short dry central Colorado summer, before the thousands of home builders who now people that vast region had done more than just knock at the gates of this richest El Dorado, a canvas-arched wagon of the type known as a prairie schooner rolled slowly over the grassy plain. Not so many years before the unshod hoofs of Indian ponies and great herds of buffalo had passed that way, churning the sun-baked sod into powdery dust; later on had come the wagons of homesteading immigrants and the saddle horses and pack mules of cattle men and miners. But miles and miles, and days and nights of rolling, broken, uninhabited plain and mountain still intervened between each claim or homestead.

The saw-toothed mountains were surrounded by the filmy haze of distance; the sky was deep turquoise, inter-splashed with mauve and orange; the ragged buttes were beginning to sprout new growths of silvery sage upon their dun-coloured flanks. In the upper foothills and the mountain

beyond, patches of snow, some soiled and discoloured, late reminders of the winter which still lingered in the higher reaches, shone white and yellow in the rays of the declining sun. A gentle breeze blew from the west, swirling some rags of creamy cloud before it. In all the world, save for the slow moving wagon, no sign of man was visible.

The creaking wheels rolled on, crushing the newly sprouted bunch grass and the fragrant clumps of sage. Occasionally the mouth of a badger hole or a half-buried rock caused a rough, bone-jarring jolt. The plodding horses heaved and strained under their load, their sweat drenched flanks palpitated rapidly, their bright eyes were dulled by hunger and weariness. Since noon two days ago, almost without food or rest, they had travelled. The sun had gloriously risen and set twice and now was about to set again, and still they travelled. They were fagged to the dropping point, but somehow they kept moving, urged on to their endless effort by the indomitable will of one who rode behind.

The youthful driver was as weary as his team. His tanned face was gray and drawn about the corners of the lips, his head sagged, and his eyes were red-rimmed from want of sleep. Hunched up in the corner of the seat he dozed, starting awake occasionally to cluck to his horses and stare across

the fading plain. Beside him on the wide seat, curled up like a puppy in a nest of blankets, a young child slept peacefully; behind the driver in the body of the wagon under the canvas arch a stone-faced woman sat staring into space. The sleeping boy was her son. Her husband had been the man who now lay dead on the floor at her feet, his bearded features covered with a clean white handkerchief.

Long since had the tear wells of the woman's eyes run dry. She had wept until she could weep no more, and now she sat unseeing, motionless as the stark form at her feet, swaying mechanically to those creaking jolts as a part of the wagon itself, living only in the spirit—a spirit which kept even the horses awake and on the move. She was thinking, thinking, always thinking. Thinking thoughts which were alternately centred in the dead man in the bed of the wagon and in the boy who slept on the driver's seat. But most of all, because her grief was fresh and very keen, they centred in the dead man.

So it was for this she had left a home of ease and luxury to follow him—her man—into the wilderness. For this that she had toiled early and late, doing a man's work in addition to her own, smiling cheerily when weariness dragged at her like a quicksand, fighting at hardship and misfortune as only a

woman can laugh who strives shoulder to shoulder with the man she loves. And now the tears !

Not that she regretted. Oh, no ! not that. She had given gladly. Had it been hers to give she would have given more. For that year just ended in their mountain cabin she would not have accepted a queen's birthright in exchange. She had known true happiness, this girl-wife, and even now in her dry-eyed misery she was glad—almost exultant. Their few years together, hard as they had seemed at times, loomed now in the bulk as a span of triumph unalloyed. For he had idolised the woman who had laughed at hardship by his side ; they had only lived for, and in, one another during those wonderful days. Their crude little cabin by the bubbling spring at the foot of the cliff had been to them a joyous haven. Never a passing twinge of regret, never a single sting of remorse, had marred their union.

Together, hand in hand, with their boy-child, then nine months old, carried in a pannier on his back, as for ages the Indian squaws had carried their offspring, they had discovered those yellow outcroppings which later on were to spell fortune—and ruin—for them both. Together, though many times he had demurred at her insistence upon taking her part in this, they had slowly deepened and widened the mouth of their mine ; together the



had weighed and counted the dust and nuggets which almost from the first stroke of the pick had flowed into the buckskin bag in which they banked their hoard. And then in the long evenings by the light of crackling logs they had planned and dreamed of the future which then had seemed so wonderfully near and real.

Such had been their happiness. Utopian, of course, as it had turned out. But when she looked back now the woman knew that nothing in exchange, save only a renewal of the vital spark in that still clay at her feet, could be so fine. There had been times even when she had actually begrudged the help of Jim, the vagrant youth who now drove the horses: she wished that she might have done it all. For now, too soon, the end had come. No future now—nothing! Just his lifeless husk, the buckskin bag bulging with its yellow treasure, her memories, and . . . THEIR BOY!

The boy at least had been spared her. Their boy. The only thing that still retained a part of the living image and personality of him who had gone. In life he had been a tall fair man. His son was fair, and she knew that he would be tall when he came to man's estate. Her feverish eyes swept the soft blush-tinted cheeks of the little fellow and rested upon his saffron curls. For a moment she was almost happy and at peace again in the pride

of her motherhood ; then she remembered and a dry sob racked her frame. But only for an instant.

"The boy must live," she murmured. "I must save our boy !"

At last, when the sun had descended behind the mountain range and the soft gray dusk of early evening was falling over the prairie, a group of ramshackle buildings came in sight a mile or two away. A squat, one story house of rough logs with a sod roof, a shed or two nearby, and just beyond a large corral of unpeeled poles. In the foreground was a narrow creek, fringed thinly with cottonwoods, and to one side a small ploughed field in which the weeds were just beginning to show.

The place was even more untidy, desolate, and unattractive than the average dwelling one met with in that raw, unsettled land ; but at sight of it the youth sat up abruptly and shouted to his horses, and they of their own accord raised up their drooping heads and strained harder at the traces. The driver recognised the shack as the abiding place of some home-steader, or "nester," and the tired team sensed that here at last was food and rest.

Deep sunk in grief and reflection though she was, the woman suddenly awoke to knowledge of the world around her. She turned and raised herself until she could look out through the front opening of the wagon. She spoke to the driver, who she

his head. How was he to know to whom the ranch belonged? He knew only that here was shelter of a sort, and like the team he drove he was eager to reach it. What he wanted most just then were food and rest, principally rest. He was weak from weariness.

The wagon dipped sharply over the brink of a hill. There was no road, not a trail even, just the bunch grass and sage with here and there a corrugated stone. It was rough going: the grass was slippery as grease; the unshod horses slid and lurched as they began the descent; the hollow beneath was full of sage, the greening grass had little white and yellow flowers in it, and the creek dashed merrily over jagged rocks. The night was closing in, it grew rapidly darker and darker; coyote chorus burst out somewhere to the east; frogs croaked in the lush at the creek edge. It was all that the wearied half-starved horses could do to hold back the wagon in its career down the hill. They nearly bogged in the bed of the creek, lashed through the sparkling water that they were mad to drink, up the sloping bank on the other side.

The woman was not cruel. Quite the contrary, time was, and not long past either, when she had petted and pampered these very horses, fed them sugar and other tit-bits from her own scanty stock,

But now her thoughts were elsewhere. She pursued her way regardless. *His* corpse lay there before her eyes. It must be buried first of all; after that . . .

Beyond that point she had not thought clearly as yet, although she dimly realised that there was a beyond. A beyond for him as well as for her, and for their boy. But it was the immediate present that now occupied her sorrow deadened mind, the present and the past. His dear body must be laid safe away from profaning touch or look. Then, and not until then, would she think of herself and the young life which now held all that was left to her of *him*. With one hand she steadied herself against the increased lurching of the wagon, and waited.

Fate had brought her to this lonely homestead. She saw its sordid ugliness grow second by second, foot by foot, as the wagon crunched onward. To this squalid horrible place—a mere confusion of sheds, empty tin cans, refuse of many kinds—she had brought her man at the end of their last earthly journey together. She shivered as if from cold, and moaned softly to herself.

The wagon halted in front of the shack in which, as if by magic, a twinkling light had suddenly sprung up. The driver slid stiffly over a wheel to the ground. A man stepped out through the



The woman was no beggar. She wished only to learn of the nearest place of burial and of some one who could perform the last sad rites over the body of her loved one. It was little enough, God knows, that she could now do for him. She would pay of course. She had gold. They had struck it rich back there in the mountains. Her husband had died a millionaire. He must have decent Christian burial. His relatives were people of distinction. When they knew they would doubtless wish to remove his body ; in the meantime . . . And so on for many halting, breathless sentences.

It was a pitiful story. Another man than Yankee Jack would have been touched deep. But Slade was a man apart. A human jackal. Gold ! That one word alone of all her panting outburst got under his thick skin. His oily smile broadened. He removed the reeking pipe from his lips and began to talk.

She learned that, travelling as she must, the nearest town was nearly a week away. There was a graveyard there, yes ; but Slade was doubtful about a minister. There had been no church there at the time of his last visit some months ago. Still, there might be some one who was familiar with the service for the dead. Of course . . .

A week away ! The woman almost collapse where she stood. She knew that she could not

take him so far, even had she been able to obtain fresh horses it would have been impossible. The weather was turning very warm. He must be buried soon—at once; on the open prairie and without benefit of clergy if Fate willed it so. But—he must be buried.

She struck a swift bargain with the nester. Paying a big price in raw gold for a piece of land which the man himself did not own—though, of course, in her grief and inexperience, she never guessed this. She tried to be very business-like. She drew up a bill of sale to the little plot of ground, which Slade signed and the driver clumsily witnessed. Then, tired as they both were, she forced herself and the youth to dig the last resting-place for her man. Even Yankee Jack, the lazy and shiftless, imbibed something of her energy, or perhaps it was the thought of the gold in that bulging bag. At any rate, he helped, and by daylight next morning the grave was dug.

## CHAPTER XXV

It is a mooted question as to the ultimate reward of virtue, but few will deny that the devil is often wonderfully indulgent to those who worship at his shrine. Yankee Jack was one of these. He was a sneak and a bully, tricky as a coyote, with enough of animal courage to carry through the schemes his cunning brain devised. He was shrewd and avaricious as a gutter-bred Jew; he took no unnecessary chances in his knavery; when he broke the laws of his fellows—and in spite of his comparative youth he had already broken many—he preferred the sly and tortious course to that which, if quicker and more direct, carried with it the slightest risk of detection. But he loved money almost as much as he loved life—his own life—and when an opportunity for profit offered itself it seldom failed to find him ready. There was no time known to man at which he balked, provided the chance of gain was great enough.

Such an opportunity, he decided, had come to him now. This woman with her dead husband, her infant son, and her bag of gold must have been guided straight to his door by Satan himse



Already, even before the grave was fully dug, Slade saw a chance for gain as easy as it was large and unlikely of subsequent discovery, and this gain was not entirely represented by the gold in the buckskin bag. In fact, the treasure in the bag loomed relatively small as compared to that other treasure which he knew to exist somewhere in the back ground. The woman had not been beneath his roof for an hour before her host was in anticipation gloating over the mine from which the contents of the bag had come. Somewhere in the cogs of his scheming brain a voice whispered that he would presently know all, that the hard-won fortune of this woman and her child was already as good as his. All he needed to do was to wait. The earth had not been trampled firm over the grave before Yankee Jack saw himself living rich and respected he who had been a pariah all his life.

When the woman's worn-out organism refused to function further and she fell in a faint across the new-filled grave, the nester's solicitude was touching. He ran to her at once, and between them he and the driver took her up and carried her inside the sod-roofed shack, where they placed her in a frowzy bunk in the room which already held her child. She must not die too soon, not before she had revealed certain information which to her host was all important.

She lay unconscious in the clutches of what Slade correctly diagnosed as an attack of mountain fever. Doubtless it had been brought on by worry and privation ; the driver said that she had not slept or eaten for several days. They tended her as best they could. There was, of course, no doctor available, no drugs or medicine save only such few simple remedies as the woman herself had carried amongst her effects, and from the first her case was hopeless. Slade, who had seen death before in many forms, knew this, so did Jim, the driver ; but where the latter was racked by genuine grief and honest in his ministrations to the sufferer, the former called upon hypocrisy to take the place of sympathy. His anxious face masked thoughts of pure self-interest : she must not die now, not before he had learned what he meant to learn.

Gold ! gold ! gold ! Such was the magical refrain that sang through Yankee Jack's brain and danced before his introspective gaze, even as his eyes watched the woman breathe her last. Gold ! gold ! gold ! was the tune that trembled on his lips as he helped the driver to dig a second grave beside that first one on the hill and to lay therein the mortal remains of this woman who had loved too hard. And gold ! gold ! gold ! made music in the nester's ears as he stood now two mornings after the fine tragedy, smoking his reeking pipe, and gazin

through an unglazed window toward those twin mounds on the barren hillside.

In Slade's hand was a letter recently abstracted from the travellers' effects, and just read, in his crafty eyes a reflective gleam. He was planning as he smoked. Schemes ran through his cunning brain like water over the bed of a brook, bubbling here, back-eddying there, but clear and free and racing in mid-channel. It was the scheming of an outcast beast, a beast long since abandoned by most of his own kind, but not yet cornered by the hounds.

That purloined letter told many things which Slade had been eager to learn. He knew now beyond shadow of doubt who these people were who had so recently been buried just outside his door. The name was unfamiliar to him, but, judging from various things, Slade guessed shrewdly enough that it was a name well known in the world of society and finance. Between the letter and the mine, whose exact location he had found jotted down in a notebook, to say nothing of certain disjointed words which the woman had babbled during her illness, and which he had easily pieced together, he knew that his first guess had been correct. These people had been *sent*. The big chance he had waited for so long had come to him at last. He was a made man. The mine would probably make him

ch for life. But if it didn't—he knew that mines were uncertain at best—well, then, there was the name and address given in the letter, and—the boy!

Slade chuckled gleefully when he considered this latter part of his maturing plan. Here, indeed, was a goose that should lay many a golden egg. If the mine proved after all to be barren, or not quite rich enough to serve his purpose, the boy, properly handled, should prove to be a veritable mint. Properly handled! Yankee Jack was tickled by the phrase; he chuckled again behind his beard. He knew himself to be entirely capable of making the most of the situation. It was a task in which he felt that he would take much joy. Everything, in fact, was turning out even better than he had hoped at first; he'd had a real stroke of luck at last. He knew now just what he would do, only a few more hours of waiting and hypocrisy before he would be free to leave this dirty hole forever. He grinned and stroked his tawny beard complacently.

He remained inside the shack for a long time. There was no witness to what he did there, but when he came out into the yard he was smiling. That friendly, oily smile of his was familiar to those few persons who had ever met him upon intimate terms; it was a sure sign that the devil in the man

was uppermost. He called Jim, the driver, to him.

"Well, Jim," he began affably, when the two were seated, between them a bottle of whisky which the nester had produced from somewhere. "Well, Jim, it sure looks like your folks had played in rotten luck. Both dead and buried just when, I reckon, they'd struck it pretty rich. Life's a funny thing sometimes. Damn if she ain't!"

"Yeah, sure is." Jim thoughtfully filled his pipe. It was plain to the shrewd eyes watching him that the youth had been badly shaken by the double tragedy. He was an honest lad: he showed his emotions; and this sudden thrusting of responsibility upon him had left him a little dazed. He would wake up presently perhaps, but before that . . .

Yankee Jack concealed a sneer beneath his too friendly smile, and went on:—

"You've known 'em a long time, I reckon?"

"Nope, not so long." Jim shook his head and stooped a little to light his pipe. "I hired out to 'em only a few months back," he continued between puffs. "I wandered into their camp, I did: I was headin' down toward the cow country, aimin' to get me a job some place. I was near starved. He—they took me in, an' I've stuck with 'em since. They was good people, Slade. Big game

back yonder on their home range, I reckon, but easy as good grub to get along with. They treated me white. I'm sure sorry they've cashed. I sure am."

"Of course you are; that's natural. It's easy to see they're real folks, Jim." Slade leaned forward, poured a stiff drink of the fiery whisky into a tin cup, and pushed it toward his companion. "Drink up," he said; and when the feat had been accomplished:—

"You know their names and where they came from, an' all that, I reckon?"

The boy nodded as he put down the emptied cup.

"Their name's Smith," he explained; "'Jack' an' 'Neeta,' they called each other; but I don't know just where they hailed from, Slade. Somewhere East, I reckon. They never said. They were city folks, all right. The little feller, his name's Bobbie. He . . ."

Slade smiled as he refilled the cup and pushed it forward. The luck seemed all to be on his side. These people whom he meant to rob had not even been known locally by their true names. They had travelled under an alias as did so many others, for one reason or another. Once the driver had been safely put out of the way not one chance in a thousand would remain of his employers being traced, not even in the most unlikely contingency

of an inquiry being made. But Jim must be silenced in proper style ; no one but a fool took unnecessary risks.

" Yes, I know," the nester affirmed. " I've looked over some of the lady's papers—had to, you know, to get a line on matters. There's the kid to think of, for one thing. What I'm wonderin' now is, what are we going to do about it ? Here we are pretty near a week by team from Ledge City with the two dead folks and the boy here on our hands. I'm only a rough sort of a cuss, Jim, but I know what's right and proper. Word's got to be sent to the relatives back East, and the boy needs a woman's care. Seems to me, Jim, you ought to be on your way to town right now."

Jim nodded sagely. He was very young, and as is often the case with youths of his type, his reasoning processes were primitive. Besides, as Slade had intended that it should, the whisky had already begun to befuddle him somewhat. He was not drunk exactly, neither was he entirely sober, and being young it pleased him in his exhilaration to ape the experienced man of the world. He had, of course, no cause to doubt the nester's honesty of purpose. In a word, Slade shaped him to his will as easily as a sculptor moulds a lump of wet clay.

" Reckon I had," the driver admitted, after due consideration, " but I ain't hardly had time yet to

et myself organised. And say! How do I know here to go, or what to do? I'm a stranger here myself. I can't take the kid clear back East, can I? Travellin' costs money."

"Sure. But you don't need to travel none, Jim. Tell you what I'll do. I can't leave here right now myself, but I'll give you the name of a friend of mine at Ledge. He'll put you straight. All you need to do is to send word of what's happened to the kid's relatives at the address I'll give you. Wavy? They'll come, or send, out here likely, an' they're the people I figure they are you won't lose on the deal. They'll be right grateful—you can gamble on it. All you need to do is keep the kid safe and hearty till you hear from 'em. Put that sack of dust in the bank too, I would. It's wise to keep everything just so in cases like this. There's plenty of grub in the wagon, the team is rested now, and it's a plain trail to town. If you start soon you'll camp at Squaw Springs to-night, it's a good piece on your way. Come on, I'll help you hook up. But wait a minute. Let's have another drink first."

An hour later, Jim, with the orphaned child, who was entirely unaware of the horror which had come upon him, was still to come into his life, sitting on the seat beside him, drove off in the direction of Ledge City. He watched them disappear behind the crest of



a nearby hill with a sardonic smile on his bearded lips. Thus far his plan had worked without a single hitch. Jim was still to be disposed of, of course ; but not now or here at the ranch. Better to wait awhile and then follow and overtake them at the Springs, where, when the driver's body was found, as it probably would be some day, his death would be attributed to unknown hands. At any rate, Slade knew that there would be nothing to connect *him* with the deed, and that was all he really cared about just then.

He waited therefore until mid-afternoon before he saddled his own horse and took down a repeating rifle from its pegs on the shanty wall. Then, having carefully stowed away the papers which he had stolen from the dead, he fortified himself with a drink of whisky and rode off on the trail of the wagon.

## CHAPTER XXVI

WHEN he reached this point in his narrative, which for the sake of clearness and brevity has not been given in exactly his own words, Regan paused, and for some minutes thereafter every one was silent. Under the spell of that remarkable story, which had carried them back some twenty years in time and across some hundreds of miles of space, they all were too full for utterance; each in his or her own manner was thinking—waiting for the end. To some of them it may have seemed, perhaps, that one story had been intruded before another was entirely done, but if this was so they were soon to learn their error. The climax was approaching steadily, just as inevitably as had come that Nemesis which for nearly a quarter of a century had dogged the footsteps of the man once known as Yankee Jack, and this climax when it arrived was destined to surprise them all. Even Big Tom had as yet no inkling of what would happen there before their eyes in the very near future.

It was Bob who finally broke the pregnant silence. All through the narrative, which to him had been

even more intimate and terrible than to any of the others, he had scarcely taken his gaze from Regan's face. Like one hypnotised he had sat leaning a little forward in his chair, staring; indeed there were moments when he actually appeared to cease breathing, so eagerly was his attention focused on the tale. Now, like one just rousing from a too vivid dream, he shook his head and straightened up.

"The—those people in the wagon, Tom, the man and the woman who died. Who—who were they?" he asked. "And the boy? Was he . . ."

Regan smiled quietly and nodded.

"The boy was yourself, lad, just as you've guessed," he answered. "The others—the man and the woman who worked the mine an' whom Slade robbed were your father and your mother. There's not a doubt of it. I have papers here"—he tapped his pocket—"that were stolen from the wagon at the time I've told you of. They . . . But you'd better let me finish this in my own way. There's more to tell yet before we come down to the present." He fell silent and seemed to consider for an instant, then as Bob inclined his head in assent he went on.

"By now, of course, you'll all understand that this man Slade I've been speakin' of is him most of us have known for years as Jackson Lindsay.

ndsay was the right name of the man who died the wagon, an' Slade assumed it, I reckon, to ver his own tracks an' to pave the road for what as to follow. He was a bad actor, was Yankee ick. No need to tell you that, I reckon; but ever an' heartless as he was he made one big istake right there at the start—he sure did. He as too confident. He knew himself to be a dead ot, an' that evening when he potted the driver f the wagon there at Squaw Springs he threw own on the boy's head, an' *he didn't shoot but once!* What's more, when the driver fell an' lay still Slade ever more'n glanced at his body. He felt sure he lad was dead, you see, an' right then, I reckon, e was too busy thinkin' of his own skin.

"Consequently, after the shootin' he didn't go near the body a-tall. He was in a hurry to get away. He sure was. He just took the outfit, child an' all, an' drove off, leavin' Jim layin' there on the ground for the coyotes to pick. In fact, Slade didn't linger none to speak of anywheres in that neighbourhood. Sun-up next day found him started on his way to the mine, an' I figure he didn't rest much until he got there. It was the gold he wanted most, but he took the little boy—that's you, Bob—along with him. The kid bein' too young, of course, to realise what was goin' on.

"But when he got to the mine Slade found that

it wasn't noways as rich as its former owners had thought it was. Bein' tenderfeet, they had taken only what was a good-sized pocket for the pure quill, an' it didn't take long for Yankee Jack to dope out the truth. Still, he stuck around until he'd cleaned up what pay there was—with what he'd already got in the sack it made a pretty good stake—an' he finally managed to unload what was left of the mine on to a young feller that happened to come prospectin' into the neighbourhood. He did all this under the name of Jackson Lindsay. For one thing, you see, he was enough like Lindsay in general appearance—they both were big men an' blond—to pass for him in a way, an' he was always mighty careful to keep clear of his old haunts.

“At last—still passin' for Lindsay—Slade quit that country complete an' drifted up into Wyoming an' Montana, where he milled around for a considerable spell, drinkin' an' gamblin' accordin' to his habits. He had money now, you see, with prospects of more in the back of his schemin' head, an' he never was the sort to settle down to steady work. All this time, of course, he'd kept the boy with him. It was easy enough, I reckon. He kept away from places where he'd been known in the past, an' nobody asked him questions much. The country was raw an' unsettled mostly then, there

was no law to speak of, an' every man was too busy mindin' his own business to take much interest in strangers. That's how Slade got by, an' if there ever was a real close search made for Jackson Lindsay an' his wife an' son, Yankee Jack never heard tell of it. He just kept on driftin' until he finally landed in Moondance an' settled down to cattle ranchin'. It was about this time you met up with him, I reckon, Dad?"

Regan looked at Kent, who nodded.

"I reckon," he said. "Somewhere about then, Tom. I never knew much of him, though."

"Sure you didn't. Neither did anybody else. He took good care of that. In those days there was just one man who knew the truth an' he was in no shape to tell it—then. I mean Jim Turlock: him who'd been the driver of Lindsay's wagon on the day that it pulled into Yankee Jack's front yard."

"Then—then Slade didn't kill him, after all?" Betty burst out eagerly. "But you said that he fell, and . . ."

"I know, I said that, miss; I sure did." Regan smiled back. "But I never said he was dead. As a matter of cold fact, he wan't. Not be a long jump. It's Jim Turlock more'n anybody that we owe thanks for learnin' the truth. If it hadn't been for Jim there'd never have been a murder at

the Half Moon, an' Bob might have gone to his grave thinkin' he was Yankee Jack's own son."

"By George!" David Kent exploded. "I begin to see now what you're driving at. It was the man Turlock, of course. He killed Slade."

Regan said nothing for a moment. He merely smiled a little as he produced and loaded his battered corncob. Then, when the pipe was drawing nicely, he took up the thread of his narrative. A keen observer might have noticed a twinkle of quiet exultation in his eyes. He had, somehow, the air of a magician who, having mystified his audience during the preliminary progress of some act of legerdemain, was about to perform his most startling trick.

"You see, when Turlock was shot," he explained, "the bullet, instead of passin' straight through his head as Slade figured it had, glanced on his skull. It made an ugly wound, but it didn't kill him. It just knocked the sense out of him. He came to finally, but he might have died, at that, if he hadn't been found an' picked up by a travellin' cowpuncher, who packed him into town an' turned him over to a doctor. The doctor cured the wound all right—Jim was practically a well man in a couple weeks—but his memory had quit him cold. He n't remember a thing, not a darn thing of his it, or how he'd come to get that crack on the

kull. For a long time, several years I reckon it was, he drifted around the country like a man in a fog. He was physically able, you understand; he could work; but he didn't know his name even. That explains how Yankee Jack got the start he did."

"But Turlock recovered finally, Tom—his memory, I mean?" Bob put in quickly.

"Sure he did. But by the time he done so he'd wandered through a couple of states an' he was a good many hundred miles from Ledge City. Still, the fog had left him an' he remembered what had happened up to the time he stopped to camp at the Springs, although, of course, he didn't know for sure yet that Slade was the skunk who tried to murder him. He had suspicions, however, an' the first shot of it all was that he went back an' tried to locate the nester. He didn't succeed; not then. By that time Yankee Jack was miles away an' movellin' under the name of Lindsay, which name, I'll recollect, Turlock had never been familiar with a-tall since at the time he knew 'em Jackson and Lindsay an' his wife had called themselves Smith. Besides, the country had settled up a lot by that time. There were new people every place an' none 'em had ever heard of Slade. But Jim stayed with it. I'll say he did! An' the longer he kept mchinn' and figurin' things out in his own mind



the surer he grew that Slade was up to some dirty game of which his own murder had been only the beginnin'. He hadn't forgot you, Bob, Jim hadn't your folks had been good to him, an'—well, there was his own score to pay.

"He found the mine, of course, what was left of it, but no news of the man he was after there either. Even then he didn't give up; he kept on searchin'. All this took time; it sure did. Jim Turlock was a poor man. He had to work his way around the country an' there were long spells when he stayed in one place. But he never lost sight of his main idea, never. He aimed to find Yankee Jack an' get square with him if it took him all of his life. Years passed. Jim Turlock was a gray-haired man when he drifted into Moondance one day an' recognised Slade on the street. That was some time ago, or more'n twenty years after that shot was fired at Squaw Springs, an' from that minute onward Jack Slade was a marked man.

"The moment that Turlock had waited at work for for so long had come at last. If any of you folks have ever pined for a thing for half a lifetime, an' then all of a sudden got it, you'll know something of how he felt. He was some happy to reckon. He had his enemy in the hollow of his hand, he figured. He knew Yankee Jack in spite of the years an' his change of name, but Yankee

Jack did not—could not—know him. Durin' all those years he'd made a plan of what he should do f ever he found his enemy. He could see no satisfaction in vengeance unless the guilty man knew now an' why he was bein' punished. Death was too clean, too merciful, for a skunk like Slade. Besides, there was no hurry. Havin' waited twenty years, Jim didn't begrudge a month or so longer. He played careful. He got himself a job at a ranch in the neighbourhood an' settled down to keep tabs on Slade.

"In a month he knew the man's habits better even than I reckon you knew 'em, Bob. He knew Slade was a hard drinker, an' that he was mixed up with a gang of boot-leggers, an'—other things. He knew that Slade and Sheriff Flint was thick as three in a bed, an' he knew too, or he guessed easy enough, that you were the same lad who as a baby had ridden alongside of him on that day when he first met Slade. Right then, I reckon, he made up his mind that you must be told the truth, Bob; but he had to go slow. As yet, you see, he hadn't any real proof. Only his word, an' what was his bare word against the word of a big rancher like Yankee Jack had grown to be? It was evidence he needed: the papers an' things he guessed that Slade had stolen from the real Jack Lindsay, an' which he never doubted, somehow, that the thief

had kept by him some place. So watched. Finally, when he figured about ripe, he called on Slade Moon."

"And that was when he killed hi

## CHAPTER XXVII

"No." Regan shook his head and smiled a little oddly at his young friend's outburst. "No, Bob, Turlock didn't kill him then. He didn't aim to. You see, he'd been doin' a heap of thinkin' since he'd located Slade an' discovered that the man was mixed up in so much crooked work, an' the size of it was that he'd changed his original plan a bit. Twenty years is a pretty long time, you know, to nurse a grudge—we can't blame Turlock much, I reckon, if he'd seemed to get cracked a little on the subject. At any rate, he figured he could make Yankee Jack suffer worse by givin' up his ill-gotten gains, payin' through the nose, you might say, for all he'd done, than by snuffin' him out. Also, as we said, it was Jim's idea that you should be told the truth an' that the ranch an' all should be turned over to you to whom he figured it rightly belonged. In other words, once the proof was in his hands, he aimed to show up Slade for the crooked skunk he was.

"Well, he made himself known to Yankee Jack an' put the proposition up to him. There was some

scene, I reckon. There sure must have been. I ain't got the complete dope on that first meetin', but knowin' Slade, I can guess about how he must have took on when he found that Turlock had come up out of the grave to call his hand. It was interestin', I'll bet. It sure was. Turlock didn't have any real proof, of course, but he'd learned enough about Slade's affairs by this time to throw a pretty powerful bluff, an' the mere fact of him showin' up alive thataway was like an ace in the hole. Slade took on scandalous, I reckon. He begged a whined like the dog he was; he offered to split with Jim, offered to do most anything in fact that would save him from the fate he deserved. But Turlock was stubborn. He hadn't forgotten those twenty years of grief, you see, an' he didn't allow to be bribed. The best he would do was to give Slade a little time before he sprang the bomb on him, if it didn't actually put him in the p. And that's where Turlock overplayed his hand.

"For Yankee Jack was no fool. As soon as he got rid of his unwelcome guest that night he began to plan a countermove. He was, as I've told you, one of the partners in the boot-leggin' game with Flint an' Lacy, an' it didn't take long for him to figure what he'd do. He knew that Flint sometime made use of an organisation called the 'Gray Hood'

to get rid of people who were hostile to his interests—kind of a Klu Klux on a small scale it is—an' he figured it would be easy to arrange so that these hooded riders would put Turlock out of the way. But at that he didn't want to confess all of his own past to Luke Flint. Consequently, he made it known in certain quarters that Jim Turlock was a revenue agent on the trail of the boot-leggers."

"That's it, of course—the Hoods!" Bob exclaimed suddenly. "That accounts for the headless figures I saw that night. Funny I'd never thought of them."

Big Tom smiled again. For some time it had been apparent that both he and Bob were occupying a world by themselves, a world in which things outside the circle of Regan's narrative had no place. Even Betty and her uncle were forgotten, although they too in their way were as keenly interested, too absorbed to note anything that went on beyond the walls of the room in which they sat.

"For a good while," Regan continued, picking up his story once more, "Slade had been gettin' tired of your society, Bob. The plan he'd held to for years of milkin' your relatives back East hadn't worked out the way he'd figured it would, an' the two of you didn't team at all. Now he decided that if he could get rid of you he'd have a better show to come clear in case his other plans failed,



expostulated. "If the murder occurred as you say, how was I knocked unconscious, and why was I carried up to my room? Of course, Lacy may have lied, but he said he found me on the bed when he arrived—it was that which put into his head the idea of trying to shift the whole thing on to me."

"I know," Regan nodded; "but Cock-Eye's tellin' the truth, I reckon, or part of it. His story clears up one of the dark spots in the case; it's the only way we can account for the frame-up. As for you bein' put to bed—that's easy. It was the murderer knocked you out an' put you there, lad. He told me himself that he met you outside, where you was wanderin' around like a man in a dream, an' hit you a clip on the head. Then he took your horse to help him in his getaway. You see he'd tangled up with a couple of Gray Hoods a little bit before that an' been hurt some himself, although he wasn't weak yet from loss of blood as he got later. It was Taps who helped him an' guided him to the cave behind White Falls, where they hid until I trailed 'em." And Big Tom went on to explain how he had come to discover the murderer, a story to which his hearers listened eagerly.

"The sick man looked pretty far gone," he wound up. "I thought he was dyin', so after I got Taps to talk a bit an' had satisfied myself that the Injun



wan't actually guilty of much wrong himself, I sent him to town for Doc Weyman. Doc brought the sick man back to his senses, an' he confessed the whole works. I've got it all written down an' signed. It's a-plenty to clear you, Bob. It sure is."

"Is the murderer dead, then?"

"Not so far as I know. He wan't when I last saw him—he was restin' fairly easy. By then Doc Weyman an' I had taken him down to the Half Moon an' made him as comfortable as we could, all on the quiet, of course. Doc, he promised to watch out for him while I came up here. But he'll die, Doc says. It's the layin' out in that damp cave. His hurt itself wan't so serious, not at first. Of course he might get well—they do sometimes. But it'll be better all round, I reckon, if he dies."

"I suppose so, although after what you've told me I can't help feeling a certain respect and sympathy for him. God knows, Slade deserved his end. But even yet I don't see just how you came to pick up Turlock's trail. I thought there were no clues. That is, none which did not point to me."

Regan chuckled. Once more a hint of suppressed exultation in his manner gave evidence that he was holding something back. Yet he explained quietly enough.

"Right there's where you were wrong," he said.

"The clue was there in plain sight all the time, but we all were too blind to see it. We jumped at a conclusion at the start that kept us guessin' all the way—we sure did. That dead man now—at the Half Moon, I mean—his face was battered to a jelly. We knew him by his clothes, you'll say. Right! An' at the time we never questioned nothin'. Why should we? But later . . . Well, I knew the job had been framed on you; I was right that far. At first, too, I figured Cock-Eye might be guilty, an' on top of that came the midnight visitor just missed catchin'. So far's I could see when I looked around, this party had stolen nothin'. On the contrary he'd brought home your pony, an', unless I was all wrong, he'd put something *in* the safe. Now that was a funny play for him to make, I thought. It sure was.

"Well, that safe is pretty old fashioned. I got it open finally, an' in it I found the papers I've been tellin' you of—the papers that were stolen from your folks years ago by Yankee Jack. You see—of course I didn't know all this till later—the murderer, thinkin' he was dyin', had sent Taps back home with 'em. He wanted to square himself what he could at the last, I reckon; but anyhow that's what he done. He thought he'd start you on the road to findin' out just who an' what you were, Bob. That's what put me on the right

scent, that an' those tracks I followed to White Falls.

"Then, after I'd learned what I did at the falls, I went back to town an' got what little I could out of Maizie. She was too scared of Flint to tell much, but I gathered enough to back up what I'd learned already from other sources. Of course, I figured that she'd tell Flint I'd tried to pump her, but by then I knew that the Sheriff wan't directly mixed up with the murder—though he's guilty of a-plenty besides—an' I didn't care. In fact, I hoped, an' I'm still hopin', that he'd get rattled enough to make a fool play of some kind, for I aim to put him out of office before I'm done. I've told Taps to keep an eye on him while I'm away. As for Cock-Eye: thanks to a piece of luck, we've already got *him*, an' you say he's partly confessed. That means the mystery's about cleared up, I reckon."

Regan paused to relight his pipe, which had gone out, and for a space they all were silent. Filled with a mixture of sadness and relief beyond his ability to express, Bob was hardly conscious of his surroundings. So this then was the answer to it all. He had at last discovered the secret of his birth only to learn that his parents were lost to him forever; and Slade—that . . . And after he had practically all his life believed the man to be his father!

He glanced up at Regan, who, with his broad back to the open window, sat smiling at him through a cloud of smoke.

"I should like to see those papers, Tom," he said. "I can scarcely realise it all even yet, but perhaps if I see things in black and white I'll understand. Just now I'm in a dream, I think."

"Sure. Of course, lad. I've got 'em right here," Big Tom replied, reaching beneath his coat. "They're your property, I reckon, just like the Half Moon an' all that's on it is yours by rights. There's a surprise comin' to you, lad, when you read the name that's signed to . . ."

In the very act of giving to Bob the large fat envelope which he had just taken from his pocket Big Tom became silent and for a moment as motionless as the chair beneath him. Then, almost in the same breath, he gave vent to an inarticulate roar and whirled about, while the other occupants of the room started up in consternation.

Darting across Regan's shoulder as swiftly and silently as the head of a striking rattlesnake, a hand had reached in through the window and snatched the envelope from his fingers.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

Looking up in the direction from which the hand had appeared, the four occupants of the room, who until then had been entirely unaware that they were spied upon, started in sudden consternation, and Betty barely suppressed a scream. Then came profound silence. Four pairs of eyes were fastened on the owner of the hand, who stood staring in at the window from behind the muzzle of a big revolver which seemed to menace each one of them impartially.

He was tall, this man, roughly clad, and his face and head were completely hidden by a voluminous hood of dark gray cloth which fell down to his shoulders, and through the eyelets of which his eyes gleamed. How long he had been in his present position or how much of their conversation he had overheard they could not guess; they knew only that he was there and that for the moment at least he held them all at his mercy, for grouped behind him, just visible in the gathering dusk, were three more hooded men, each one of whom carried a rifle ready in his hands.

For a considerable interval the man at the window said nothing. He did not need to. There was something ominous in the very poise of his body, to say nothing of his threatening gun, and those he faced were too well acquainted by hearsay or observation with the Gray Hoods to fail to recognise a member of that lawless band when they saw him.

It was Regan who finally broke the silence. At his first glimpse of the man who had robbed him he had sprung to his feet, poised, ready for instant action, and his right hand had darted beneath his coat toward the pistol which was hidden there; but he was too prudent to attempt to draw just then. Instantly realising the odds against them, he froze motionless, then his muscles relaxed suddenly and he dropped his hand to his side.

"Hell's bells!" he muttered.

"That's better," the hooded man said then. "Glad to see you're goin' to be sensible," and somehow it was apparent even in spite of his mask that he smiled sardonically. "We don't want to hurt nobody, but we mean business. You're under arrest—all of you."

"The devil you say. What for?"

The hooded man did not answer the question. With his unoccupied hand he deliberately pocketed the envelope he had just snatched. Then:—

"Two of you go 'round in by the door and take charge," he directed the men behind him. "The other stand guard here with me."

He fell silent again and waited while two of his followers tramped around to the front door and the third drew up a little closer to the window. The two former appeared presently in the living room doorway, and covered the prisoners with their rifles.

Regan smiled in the slow enigmatic fashion peculiar to him. He did not seem to be in the least frightened or perturbed. On the contrary, he calmly sized up the situation for a moment, raising his eyebrows a little as he glanced at Bob, who had jumped to his feet at the first alarm and now stood waiting indecisively.

"Better come in an' set, Luke," Big Tom remarked casually, and grinned at the hooded man's sudden start. "We're harmless—you got us cornered. An' anyhow this ain't a shootin' party. Too many witnesses—you couldn't get away with it—an' you'd hardly kill us *all*, I reckon. Murder's a serious thing; it sure is. It's even worse'n tryin' to hang innocent people. Better shed that mask—it looks warm—an' come in so's we can talk sociable like. I've been kind of expectin' you'd show up."

Sheriff Flint, if, indeed, the hooded man was

Sheriff Flint—and, in spite of Regan's calm assurance, none of the others could have sworn to the man's identity—remained silent for a moment. He did not move from where he stood, neither did he, as Betty feared that he might, reply to Regan's bold effrontery by violence. He simply continued to cover him with his revolver.

"Talk's cheap," he said finally. "This ain't no convention. I'm arrestin' young Lindsay there for murder, an' the rest of you on accessory charges. Also there's a little matter of boot-legging to be looked into. We got it on you, I reckon. Might as well come peaceable—save your talkin' for the judge."

"We'll see you to the devil first, that we will!" David Kent's rapidly kindling wrath at this invasion of his home suddenly burst all bounds. Regardless of their weapons, he sprang to his feet as if on the point of attacking the intruders.

"Tush, man!" he went on, his deep voice hoarse with passion. "Are you gone clean daft? D'you think to burden us innocent folk with the crimes of your own making? 'Tis your own still up yonder in the canyon—not mine. As for the rest, how long since honest servants of the law went about their duty behind masks? Let us see the face of you, you coward, though we know you well enough as it is. D'you think I don't know you, Bruce



Eaton,"—levelling a forefinger at the second of the two men beyond the window—"or you, Luke Flint? Bosh! Had ye been listening a minute since ye'd have heard that we know all. The proof is there in the envelope you've stolen. No, sir! I'll not budge from this room, nor will my niece." And to add emphasis to his words the doughty old ranchman stepped forward and passed his arm around Betty's waist, as if daring any one to separate them.

The hooded men, however, paid little heed to his outburst. Their attention—especially that of their leader—was focused chiefly upon Regan, whom they doubtless considered to be the most dangerous of their prisoners. Seeing this, Bob moved slightly in the direction of Betty and her uncle; he was thinking fast.

This wholesale arrest, though undoubtedly illegal, was not without a certain solid base to rest upon. Recent experience had already shown him how easy it was to manufacture evidence, and if these hooded men were in reality the Sheriff and his henchmen there could be little doubt but that they had carefully weighed matters before attempting so desperate a hazard. By a streak of luck the hooded man had already gained possession of the papers which would prove Bob's innocence of the charge against him; in the eyes of the law and the public he was still

but little better than a convicted murderer, and without proof to substantiate the story of Turlock, he could not hope that any one would believe him. He was still racking his brains for some way to turn the tables and regain possession of the envelope, when Regan broke the silence which had fallen since Kent's outburst.

"Better listen to reason, Luke," the big man suggested quietly, although he too could scarcely have failed to note the risk they ran. "No use tryin' to ride a bluff clear into the discard, you know. This thing's gone too far already."

"You're shoutin' it has," the other retorted, still neither affirming nor denying his identity. "That's why from now on I'd advise you to step easy. I've been here longer'n you think—I've heard considerable. I've stated my case, an' I've got witnesses an' evidence to back it. The bulk of yours, I take it, is in this here envelope I've got. The rest ain't worth a warhoop agin' what I can show. You think I'm bluffin', do you. Well, look here."

Very slowly and deliberately he took the envelope from his pocket and laid it on the window sill in front of him. Then, still without losing the "drop" on Regan, he produced a match, which he scratched on the wall at his side. At last, still with utmost deliberation so that not one of his lit

audience could fail to grasp the significance of the act, he applied the flame to a corner of the envelope.

“ There goes your evidence,” he taunted. “ What you goin’ to do about it ? ”

## CHAPTER XXIX

AT sight of this monstrous act, which to him seemed to embody the destruction of all his new-found hopes of happiness, when he realised that the hooded man actually intended to burn the only existing proof of his innocence, Bob suddenly went fighting mad. He was unarmed, but standing almost at his elbow was a small table, and on this were various articles, among others a heavy pot, or jar, of hammered brass in which Kent stored his tobacco. The envelope had just taken fire and begun slowly to burn, and the eyes of all persons in the room were focused upon it, when Bob seized this jar and threw it with all his might at the man in the window; and at practically the same instant he dived forward with outstretched hands.

Struck full on the chest by this impromptu missile, the hooded man fell back a pace and his pistol arm jerked upward, thereby giving Regan the second's respite he needed to draw his own weapon and cover the two men by the doorway, who, startled by Bob's unexpected action, and intent upon their chief's doings, had been caught a little off their

guard. As Regan turned, however, one of the pair discharged his rifle, but the shot went wild, and before it could be repeated a bullet from Big Tom's revolver broke the man's arm, causing the rifle to clatter to the floor and its owner to follow his companion, who had already fled. In the meantime, Bob had succeeded in grasping the envelope, which had begun to burn briskly.

Came a roar of exultation from Regan, an indistinguishable medley of shouts and oaths from the surprised Hoods; then loud and clear above the tumult rang Betty's scream of warning to Big Tom, who whirled on his heel to face the window just as the second of the two men outside, he whom Kent had apparently recognised as Bruce Eaton, pulled the trigger of his rifle. For just an instant Regan faltered and staggered uncertainly, then he threw up his hands and fell headlong.

As if the giant's fall had been a signal for the cessation of hostilities, the uproar ended instantly. The man who had fired the shot, probably aghast at what he had done, faded once more into the background, and his leader, having recovered quickly from the blow he had received, took charge again.

"Nice ruction you've raised," he snarled, leaning at the window pistol in hand. "All for nothing too. I told you we meant business. Now gimme

back that paper!" He spoke to Bob, who, having extinguished the flame, was smoothing the charred but not much damaged envelope between his fingers.

Bob laughed a little wildly. Regan was down, killed perhaps—he did not know—but the battle was lost in any case, and he was too desperate not to consider risk. Since he must die after all, he would die fighting. He pocketed the envelope.

"Come and get it," he retorted.

The man in the hood levelled his revolver.

"I'm countin' three," he said, "an' at the end you're doin' one of two things. You're goin' to give me that paper, or . . ." He paused impressively. "One!" he counted.

Bob faced him in silent defiance. The situation had passed beyond words. He knew that he intended to keep the envelope in his possession as long as he lived. He would never give it up while he had strength to retain it. Still, he had no wish to die. Life had suddenly become very dear and sweet to him now that he possessed the means to vindicate himself, and that Betty . . .

"Two!"

Bob stood waiting, ready for the spring which he would make just as he judged that the revolver was about to explode. Strange to say, though facing almost certain death, he felt no fear. In fact, deep within him, he was conscious of an odd elation

—a sense of daring which once or twice before, though in lesser volume now, had come to him in moments of great peril. But now, too, this daring was tempered with regret that he must relinquish all that he had wanted so to win. He would almost have welcomed death a week ago. Now . . . No! By heaven, he would not die! He couldn't. His every muscle taut as stretched wire, he waited for the slow tensing of his enemy's trigger finger to proclaim that his moment had come.

"No! no!" Betty, who until then had remained a mute and horrified spectator of all that was taking place, protested hysterically. "You mustn't, I tell you; you mustn't—you mustn't! Take the paper. But—but don't murder him!"

"Yes, lad, the lass is right," came in David Kent's deep tones. "Give up the papers since you must. We may get them back some day, but if you die it's the end. We're helpless now. I have no weapon on me. I can do nothing."

"I'm waiting," the chief of the Hoods said grimly; perhaps he had counted upon this very interference in his favour. "The old man's right. While there's life in him a man is worth a hundred dead ones. Give me that envelope an' I'll promise . . ."

"You coward!" Bob interrupted him; for he knew that he could not stand the strain of Betty's pleading. "Why don't you shoot and get it over

with? You'll get the envelope then, perhaps—off my body. But not before."

The taunt worked. Through the holes of his mask the hooded man's eyes seemed to expand and actually to blaze with anger at this final evidence of his victim's courage and apparent indifference to death. His finger was already beginning to crook tighter around the trigger of his weapon, and Bob was on the very point of launching himself through the air, when suddenly the fire in those blazing orbs seemed to die out, and the hand that held the revolver, until then steady as a rock, wavered and shook, then dropped until the muzzle of the gun pointed toward the floor.

It was then that Bob might have successfully essayed his contemplated attack, for in that instant the odds were almost even, but all set in the very act of leaping though he was, something impelled him to pause and slowly turn his head and follow with his glance the gaze of the man who faced him. When he did this his own eyes became wide and staring in horrified amazement. For a flash something which was not exactly fear, but like an icy hand for all that, clutched at his windpipe and his heart seemed to stand still.

Two men stood there in the doorway of the living room—one tall, the other short. The shorter was Taps, the Indian choreman, and the other . . .



The other was—No! Impossible! It could not be—but it *was*! The other was a corpse risen to walk again, the man whom Bob had called father for nearly all his life. The tall man was Jackson Lindsay!

For a long interval thereafter the room was like a tomb. Each one of its various occupants might have been an actor in a tableau for all the movement or sound that he made. All eyes were focused on that tall, pale-faced figure in the doorway, whose feverish gaze returned their stare in a silence as profound and full of question as their own. Even Regan, who sat up dizzily, like a man just roused from a deep sleep, froze motionless at once. Of them all the Indian alone seemed to retain full possession of his faculties, but, though his gaze darted rapidly from face to face, even he did not move or speak.

It was the presence of Taps, undeniably alive and well, which helped Bob to the realisation that, incredible as it appeared, he was indeed looking at the man who until that moment he would have sworn was dead. He was in no way superstitious, he did not believe in ghosts, and he knew that this man he was accused of having murdered was actually standing there before him, but for the life of him he could not guess how it had come about.

Lindsay, or Slade, as we must call him now,

although standing squarely erect upon his feet, looked enough like the spectre from beyond the grave for which they at first took him to make the error excusable. Except for his burning eyes he was as colourless as any ghost, and in the semi-gloom his tall figure looked thin and gaunt as a shade. In place of a hat his head was covered by a bandage, and beneath this his glaring eyes and unshaven cheeks had a truly uncanny appearance.

It was the visitor himself who finally broke the deathly silence which his apparition had caused. For some time it had been evident that his attention was occupied entirely by, and almost equally between, Bob and the hooded man—the two upon whom his strange arrival had made the most impression ; and his first words were spoken at, rather than to, the latter.

“ I’ve come in time, I reckon,” he said in a hollow voice, which seemed the result of a great effort. “ The Indian told me you were headed here, and I guessed . . . ” He stopped abruptly for an instant ; then went on more hurriedly, and in a sudden flare of anger.

“ Curse you ! ” he cried. “ Why couldn’t you leave well enough alone ? Why drag a dying man out of his bed with your greedy villainy ? Damn you and your crooked schemes ! It was I who killed Jim Turlock—no one else. But you and Bil

Lacy between you would have hung an innocent man. I'm bad, God knows ! but there's some things. . . . You never guessed I'd come to testify, did you, Flint ? You thought I died that night, and that my murderer had left the country. But I'm not dead yet. It's the boy I've come to save. Tom Regan has it—my confession—signed and witnessed. I killed Kate and Turlock that night, and then I changed clothes with the dead man and hid myself. It's the truth. I swear to it again here before you all, and you can ask Taps. He knows."

Slade paused and glared at the hooded man in whom, just as Regan had previously done, he seemed to instantly recognise Sheriff Flint. Then he looked at Bob.

"As for you," he said, "listen : My time is short. The doctor says I'm dying—I am. But first I'll tell you that I lied to you that night. I was mad then—drunk—what you will—but—I lied. The truth is in the papers I gave Regan. I robbed your folks and I meant to rob you too, but—well, I'm dying. Turlock got me that night, after all. The estate back East—yours—is in chancery, I think they call it. It's waiting for you. I could never get hold of it—I daren't go too far. They might have suspected. But you can now that you know the truth. The papers will prove your right to . . ."

He staggered a little and thrust out a hand to support himself against the door frame. Then once more he whirled upon the man in the window.

"Go!" he thundered. "Go!"

He collapsed then, suddenly, like a shot rabbit, and would have fallen headlong had not Taps caught him in his arms.

## CHAPTER XXX

REGAN was on his feet again and as steady as ever. His wound turned out to be no more than superficial, though it had stunned him for a time, and when Kent had dressed it, the big man grinned at Bob.

"You're cleared, lad," he said, "and your name's Lindsay sure enough. I reckon nobody'll dispute that now."

Betty looked at them. It was harder for her than for Bob to understand all that had taken place; yet she got it before he did.

"Slade was the injured man you found hidden behind White Falls?" she asked Big Tom.

"He sure was. Taps took him there when he collapsed after his fight with Turlock. It was Turlock's features bein' smashed beyond recognition, of course, that gave the murderer his idea of changin' places with him. Slade was a bad one all right, but he tried to square himself when he found that he was doomed. There's a little good even in the worst of us, I reckon."

Bob nodded. "He got here just in time," he said. "I owe him thanks for that, at least. Flint



Bob'll be goin' East soon, I s'pose, to hunt up his kin, an' . . ."

Big Tom was interrupted by a poke in the ribs, and looking in the direction of the ranchman's gaze, he grinned broadly. For a second the two men stared, then they turned and looked at each other, and finally, without saying a word, they walked out of the room.

Over there by the window—that same window through which the hooded man had come so very near to ending all their hopes—Betty and Bob were too deeply engrossed to be more than dimly aware of what went on around them. The lamp had been lighted; it was now some time since Slade's appearance, and night had fully descended, and in its mellow glow the two young people stood facing, but not looking directly at each other.

"Well, it's all over," Bob remarked at last, somewhat stupidly.

"Yes."

Betty, too, seemed unnaturally quiet and subdued.

Bob watched the play of the lamplight on her hair for an instant out of the corners of his eyes. He appeared to be thinking; he smiled faintly to himself. Suddenly he turned and took her by the shoulders, holding her firmly. Also he kissed her more than once.

"Don't!" she struggled with him almost as if she really wanted to get away.

He laughed softly.

"I love you," he told her. "And you love me. God knows why, but you do. You admitted it out there on the trail, you know, and . . . Why shouldn't I kiss you?"

She began to argue. She told him that then, out there in the timber, he had been just an ordinary person—a rancher like her uncle. Now, apparently, he was heir to a fortune (at least, she supposed it was a fortune) somewhere in the East, and she was only a plain girl, a mere nobody, who . . .

That was as far as she got.

"Bosh!" he exclaimed, and kissed her again. 'Fortune be darned. The only fortune I'm at all sure of, or that I want, is right here in this room. You said you loved me when, for all you knew, I was a murderer, and now that I'm proven innocent you take it back. That's not reasonable; it's not even kind. I shall go East, I suppose, but not for good and *not alone*. You're going to marry me first, my dear. Oh, yes, you are! I've suffered enough recently, you know."

"Well, that's all over now."

"Nonsense! You and I have just begun."

"Silly! You know . . ."

That's how they argued. Bob loved her; he



knew that she loved him ; and after a while he made her confess as much. That settled it. It was natural, perhaps, that they should act so after strain they had just been through together. . . by the time Regan and Kent returned to the living room—not so very soon either—they were in full agreement.

Big Tom chuckled openly and nudged his companion when he saw them.

"It looks to me," he opined, winking at Kent "like something had transpired since we left here Dad. By gum ! I knew that young feller would cut me out. I sure did."

Betty dimpled rosily.

"You sure guessed right !" she laughed.

1327

